

141



Angelina was born to trouble
...and most of it was men

HILL GIRL

CHARLES WILLIAMS



An original novel—not a reprint

Hill Girl

by

Charles Williams

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Contents

[Title Page](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-one](#)

[Twenty-two](#)

[Twenty-three](#)

[Twenty-four](#)

One

I stopped the Ford on a bench halfway down a long, gentle hill and got out and stretched and felt suddenly warm outside and inside; the morning sun was climbing higher now, and I was almost home. It was October and the colors were running down the hillsides and along the little creek bottoms like a fire that couldn't make up its mind where it wanted to go.

There had been a light frost and now all that was left of it was where the shadows still lay a little dark and cool behind the old fence posts and in the burrow pit beside the dry red clay and dust of the road. The dewberry vines didn't have any leaves now and their runners were a dead tangle, white-rimmed with frost in the shade and shiny and black and wet where the sun had struck them.

Part of the big field on the left had been in cotton that year, and I could look down the rows for a long way until they curved around, following the contour of the slope and the terrace rows. The stalks were dead now, and bare, and the sharp bolls empty, and they were all wet with the melted frost. It was the old Eilers place and I wondered idly if Sam Harley were still farming it.

The rest of the field had lain fallow for years and was grown up in weeds and sassafras bushes and there were persimmon sprouts waist-high, and now, as I was watching it, I saw a bird dog casting through it, coming up the hill toward the road. He was still a long way off, but was easy to see, a big black-and-white pointer, and he was beautiful to watch, quartering up the field in long casts with his head high, and the sight of him made me homesick and happy at the same time and I hated the years I had been away.

Soon I saw the man behind him, and then the dog froze into a beautiful point. The man came up,, with the shotgun held ready, and went in, kicking at the weeds, and the birds came boiling up with that sudden roar, as they always did, the sound carrying across the stillness of the morning to me as if they were only fifty yards away. The man's gun came up and he shot, all

with one fluid motion, and I saw one bird collapse and fold up in the air. He shot again and missed. The covey scattered, and almost mechanically I marked a pair of them down in a tangle of vines and sassafras near the road.

The man came on up the slope toward the road and I began to think there was something vaguely familiar in his big figure and the long, slouching walk. He was dressed in a bleached-out blue shirt, the worn, faded coat of an old blue serge suit, and patched overalls that were tucked into knee-high laced boots. Over his shoulder was the strap of one of those little canvas bags we used to carry our books to school in. When he was close enough to me so I could see his face I saw it was Sam Harley, and I walked across the road and climbed through the rusty wire of the fence to meet him. He hadn't changed much that I could see, and then I grinned suddenly to myself and wondered why I had expected some great change in a period of two years in a man who was past forty. He still had the slightly flat nose and high cheekbones and the very shiny black eyes that gave his face a suggestion of primitive strength.

I waved at him and said, "Hello. How's hunting?"

"Howdy," he replied, politely enough, but with no great warmth or a great deal of interest, and I could see his black eyes faintly suspicious under the brim of the shapeless old felt hat he wore. It was obvious he didn't recognize me.

"I'm Bob Crane," I said, and held out my hand. Then recognition came into his eyes and he grinned widely, exposing well-shaped but darkly tobacco-stained teeth, shifted the gun to the crook of his left arm, and shook my hand warmly.

"I'd never a' knowed you, Bob. You've shore growed. Le's see, how long's it been since I seen you?"

"About two years, I think."

He continued to grin at me happily, and at the same time just a trifle self-consciously, with the lack of poise so characteristic of the people who live off in the bottoms and rarely meet people other than the neighbors they have known all their lives.

"Been a little over two years, I reckon," he went on, feeling under some compulsion to be saying something. "You recollect the syrup-makin' down at Sully's an' we all went possum huntin' afterward? That was two years ago about the first of the month."

"I guess you're right," I agreed, looking about for the dog and wishing he would come in. Pointers are a weakness of mine. Then I saw him, coming back down the slope.

"Is that old Buck?" I asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "Belle's dead. Died last spring. She was awful old."

"Two of your birds went down in that clump over there. I marked them down just after you shot. In there, Buck!"

I waved the dog in toward the vines, which were about sixty or seventy yards away, up the hill and near the road. He wheeled and started in and then froze, beautifully, in the sunlight, with his tail straight and rigid, one foot off the ground and his head swung around to the right.

I grinned at Sam and there was a happy pride in his eyes as he smiled back at me. We both laughed then, and I said, with grave understatement, "That's a pretty good dog, Sam. I'll give you twenty-five dollars for him."

He pretended to consider the offer seriously, pulling off his old greenish-black hat and scratching his head slowly, and then replied, "Well, Bob, I don't rightly see how I could let him go for that. Him bein' so well trained and all."

I shook my head in affected disbelief that this generous offer had been refused. I knew, of course, that he wouldn't have taken five hundred for the dog, even though the sum probably represented as much as he made off the Eilers place in a year. You love hunting dogs, or you don't.

"You'd better get in there." I waved toward Buck. "He's not going to hold it all day."

"Now, Bob, you know him better'n that." He smiled, trying to keep some of the pride out of his voice because of an ingrained reluctance to appear boastful before someone outside his immediate circle. After all, I lived in town.

"Here." He handed me the gun. Perhaps he had seen me eying it hungrily.

I started to protest, but then I had it in my hand and I was going toward Buck. I made a lot of noise as I kicked in through the old sandburs and vines and high grass, and then one of the birds rocketed out right from under my feet, twisting around toward the right and downhill, and I swung around toward him and the gun caught him and passed slightly and I shot and missed. I never could hit a bird going to the right. I don't know why.

When I shot, the other one got up, fifteen yards ahead of me, the roar of his beating wings seeming almost a continuation of the noise of the gun, and I swung back and he was going away and climbing, a shot I very seldom miss, and I let go with the left barrel and he seemed to stop in the air as though there had been a string on him and I had pulled it back. And there was that old sharp thrill in it, that feeling that is part fierce exultation and part a sudden pang of remorse or something like it. A bob-white quail is a gallant little bundle of dynamite and no one should want to kill one, but you do, and in that frozen second when he stops in the air and you feel the pride of a clean kill there is also that sharp stab that is almost regret and then it is gone and there is only pride.

For the first time since they had helped me up off the canvas there in Jersey City, some of the bitterness and the galling taste of defeat had begun to wear off. This was home and I was glad I was back.

I broke the gun and took out the two empties and before I threw them down I held them up to my nose and smelled the burned powder. I took the bird from Buck and patted him on the head and he seemed to feel all right then about giving it to me instead of going all the way back to Sam with it.

I gave it to Sam and he dropped it into the canvas bag hanging from his shoulder.

"That was good shootin', Bob, considerin' you ain't done none in a couple of years," he said. Then he added hesitantly, as though he didn't want to hurt my feelings, "But yore brother'd a' got 'em both."

I nodded, remembering that Lee and Sam had hunted a lot together. "Lee's a natural," I agreed. "It's hard for him to miss."

"By the way, I seen him last Sat'day."

"You did?" I said. "How was he?"

"Oh, he looked fine. He was out to the house." He didn't say any more, as if he took it for granted I knew what Lee had been out there for. I did. Sam ran a still down in the Black Creek bottoms behind his house. I used to know where it was when I was a kid and living with my grandfather on his place across the other side of the bottom, but I had never advertised the fact. It wasn't the kind of knowledge that was considered good for you. "I was sorry to hear about yore daddy, Bob," he said after a while. The Major had been dead about six months now.

"Why?" I asked. "Didn't he ever screw you out of anything?"

Sam flushed and looked away in embarrassment and seemed to be trying to think of something to change the subject.

“Ought to be able to go coon hunting pretty soon, Sam,” I said. “How about if I come out some night and we try the bottom down below the house?”

“Why, that’d be fine. Any night you can make it, just let me know.”

I thanked him for letting me shoot the bird and crawled back through the fence and got into the Ford. I rolled on down the grade and clattered over the loose flooring of the little bridge over the creek at the bottom of the hill. The thought of seeing Lee and Mary again made the morning perfect, and I grinned. There wasn’t anybody like him. Maybe he was wild, but then lots of young bucks like him were, and he would settle down. It was funny, too, that when I got to thinking of some of the things he had done it always seemed as if he were the younger brother. As a matter of fact, he was nearly four years older than I. He was almost twenty-six.

When we were growing up, though, and in high school, he had always been an older brother, even though he got into more trouble than I did. He had been a good buffer between the Major and me, and I knew that if it hadn’t been for Lee I would have left home long before I did. It wasn’t that he fought my battles for me; with the Major I fought my own battles. It was more that Lee didn’t have to fight. He knew how to get along with people, knew that charm would get you things from them that obstinacy never could.

The troubles he got into were spectacular. When he was seventeen and still a junior in high school he had run away with a married woman.

Two

It was around ten as I drove slowly up South Street toward the square. The town was quiet and the square almost deserted. It was Friday. Tomorrow the place would be full of Fords parked fender to fender and farmers and their wives would be standing in bunches around the sidewalks and going in and out of the stores, but right now the whole town seemed to drowse under the washed blue of the sky, soaking up the warmth of the sun.

I braked to a standstill at the stop line where South Street opens into the square and looked up at the old courthouse, red and dusty and ugly, with white bird droppings spattering its walls, and swallows and sparrows circling around high up under its ornate eaves.

Swinging through the right-hand side of the square, I turned and went out North Elm, where the trees almost met over the street like a tunnel and the houses were friendly old landmarks and the lawns were wide and well kept. Eight blocks out I turned off the street to the left in the middle of the block onto the graveled driveway.

Nearly all the rest of the houses along the street were close to the sidewalks on small lots and they had grown up there long after the old Crane house was built. It sat back in the far corner of a big sloping lot half as big as a city block, with a driveway going back to it and two enormous oaks in front, and a hedge along the sidewalk.

It was one of the ugliest houses it would be possible to imagine. Built around 1910, it had all the gingerbread and scrollwork and hideousness of its time, and its last coat of white paint was now about six years old and peeling in places. My grandfather, who was a salty old gentleman and possessed of a caustic wit that was widely respected, referred to it invariably as “that architectural abortion.” It was built by the Major while he was still a young man.

At the housewarming he had asked my grandfather, so the story goes, what he thought of the parlor.

“I don’t know why, son,” the old man is said to have answered, “but I keep expecting a woman to come in and say that the girls will be down in a minute.”

I got out and went up the walk under the big oaks, feeling warmly happy about it and wondering why, for there had never been much happiness attached to the old pile when I was growing up.

I banged the big brass knocker and a Negro girl came in a minute. “Is Mrs. Crane in?” I said. “Tell her I’ve got a search warrant.”

Her eyes opened wide, showing a lot of white, and she went back down the dark hallway. I stepped inside and saw it hadn’t changed much; there was the same old milky mirror by the hat-rack and the hard-bottomed bench and the straw carpeting.

From the living room at the end of the hall came the clicking of spike heels and then she was in the doorway.

“Hello, Mary,” I said.

She came down the hall toward me, walking fast, with that long-legged gracefulness I remembered so well, and the red-haired loveliness of her gave me the same old feeling of warmth. I was never really in love with Mary, I guess. As accurately as I can describe it, the feeling she always gave me when I saw her was one of pride that she was a friend of mine and liked me.

She came close to me and I took both her hands. “Hello, you big horse,” she said. “Don’t step on me.”

“I’m glad to see you, Mary,” I said.

“Aren’t you going to kiss me?” she demanded. “Don’t just stand there like a stadium or something and grin at me.”

I kissed her lightly on the cheek and was conscious of the amusement in the cool green eyes so close to mine.

“Well,” she said, “that’ll put me in my place, all right. Middle-aged housewife.”

She was twenty-three and she and Lee had been married a little less than a year. “You’re looking great,” I said. “How are you?”

“I’m fine, Bob. Come on back to the kitchen and tell me about yourself. Rose just made some coffee.”

We went through the living room, where a small fire was burning in the big fireplace, and on back to the kitchen and sat down at the table.

“Darn it, Bob, but I’m glad to see you. It’s a shame you just missed Lee. He left a little while ago and won’t be back for an hour or two. Tell me about yourself. You’re home for good this time, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“I’m glad you’re through college. But I’ll always hate the way you had to go.”

I stirred my coffee and broke off a piece of the coffee cake Rose had put on the table. “Why? It suited me.”

She leaned back and looked at me and sighed, shaking her head gently. “I guess it did, at that. It’s a wonder you didn’t turn professional like all the rest of the mastodons.”

I didn’t tell her about turning pro fighter and the whipping I’d taken. It was something I’d rather forget. I was good enough in intercollegiate boxing to begin to get the impression I was good, but it didn’t take me long to find out I was slow and too easy to hit, and when those heavies can get to you and keep on getting to you they can hurt you, whether you can take it or not. I’d had eight professional fights and I took the short end of six of them and quit it before I was slapped silly. It’s no racket for the second-rate.

“I see your nose has been broken again,” she said, leaning her elbows on the table and cupping her chin in her hands. “I suppose they gave you credit for six semester hours in Romance languages for that.”

“What’s Lee doing now?” I asked. My face doesn’t intrigue me as a topic of conversation.

“Nothing.” She grinned at me suddenly. “Why? Did you think he was going to be doing something?”

“Well, people have been known to work.”

“Oh, he’s working, all right. I was just being feminine and cynical. He’s busy with something called ‘looking into a couple of little deals.’ I understand it isn’t at all vague to the masculine mind.”

“I guess he sold out all the rest of the Major’s holdings when the estate was settled, didn’t he?”

“The Major sold most of it before he died, Bob. He lost a lot in some big lawsuit over a timber tract—I never did try to get it straight—and he sold both the sawmills and the gin and said he was going to quit trying to make money. You know how he could be.”

“Yes,” I said. “I know.” I took out a pack of cigarettes and shook one out. She held out her hand and I looked at her in surprise.

“I took it up about six months ago, Bob. Am I depraved?”

I lit it for her. She exhaled and gazed moodily at the cloud of smoke. “You’re funny,” she said. “You’re funny, Bob.”

“Why?”

“Why didn’t you ever try to break the will?”

“Why should I?”

“Well, Lee said the estate, house and all, amounted to nearly thirty thousand. And he left you one dollar, and you didn’t contest it. Why?”

“Did you want me to? You know whose pocket it’d come out of, don’t you?”

“Silly. I know how much you’ve always liked Lee. But nobody lets a little affection stand in his way when that much money is concerned in it.”

“No,” I said. “That wasn’t it. I just never wanted anything from him when he was alive. Why should I after he’s dead?”

“After all, you were his son. One of the only two he had.”

“We wore that out a long time ago.”

“It was a lot your fault, too, Bob. Maybe I’m taking advantage of the fact that you and I always thought so much of each other and I could say things to you nobody else could. But you’ve always been just as hard as he was.”

“Well, let’s forget it,” I said.

“He was always good to Lee. He let him have anything he wanted.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know. I just couldn’t get along with him. I didn’t know how, I guess, or maybe I didn’t try hard enough. But I’m satisfied. Let’s drop it.”

“You never change, do you, Bob? You’d rather be stubborn than right, always.” She reached over and patted my arm. “But I love you anyway. You’re my favorite bear.”

I grinned at her. “And you’re my favorite redhead. Whenever you get tired of Lee, let me know.”

“God forbid. One Crane per lifetime is all any girl should have to face.”

We went into the living room after a while and sat down on the sofa and stretched our legs out toward the fire. “What are you going to do now, Bob?” she asked. “Now that you’re home?”

“Take over the farm,” I said.

She smiled. “I thought you would. That was what you always wanted to do, wasn’t it?”

“It always seemed like home to me,” I said. “It’s funny, I guess, because I only lived out there three months out of the year, while school was out, but that was the way it seemed.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t because you were so fond of your grandfather? And back here, you didn’t—well . . .” She let it trail off as though she didn’t know how to put it. “Partly, I guess,” I said. “But I like living in the country better anyway.”

It was almost noon before Lee came home. We were sitting on the big sofa before the fire when we heard the scream of tires on pavement and then a scattering of gravel as he slid to a stop out front under the trees.

“You know, lots of people think it’s necessary to slow down to make that turn into the driveway,” Mary said musingly.

I heard his footsteps in the hall, hard-heeled and fast as always, and I could picture his long-legged stride.

He stopped in the doorway and I got up from the sofa.

“Sir,” I said, “your wife and I love each other and we think the three of us should be civilized and talk it over. All we want is a divorce and three hundred a month.”

He came on into the room and hit me on the shoulder and grabbed my hand, and there was that old wild, happy look in his eyes.

“You big homely bastard! I thought it was you when I saw that junk heap out in the drive. I’ll call a wrecker and have it towed away for you.”

No one would ever have taken us for brothers. Ever since I can remember, people have been saying, “Isn’t it funny how little resemblance there is between those Crane boys? They don’t look anything alike.”

Lee always was a handsome devil. He never seemed to go through that pimply, awkward stage the rest of us suffered. Even when we were children, girls could never keep their eyes off him. He was an even six feet tall, a full inch shorter than I, but he always looked taller because he was so rail-thin and walked so erectly. And for all his wildness and the boundless and misdirected energy he had, there was something smooth about him; maybe the self-assurance in his eyes and manner, and the way he wore his clothes.

His skin was rather dark and his face was thin with high cheekbones, and his eyes were brown and brilliantly alive. Most of the time they gave you an impression of recklessness and high good humor, but when he wanted to put on an act they could be as grave and quiet as those of a Supreme Court justice. When he wanted to turn on that urbane and deferential charm old ladies couldn't resist him and girls had even less luck. I'd seen him work girls over with his eyes, and I'd hate to have him after one I wanted.

As for me, I think there must have been some Swede in the Crane family tree away back somewhere and I got all of it. Some girl, I've forgotten her name, who used to sit next to me in English, said one time that I looked like a composite picture of all the Minnesota fullbacks since 1910. My face is square and flat-nosed and too damned healthy-looking, and it's just what you'd pick if you wanted to plug a hole in the right side of the line. In high school they called me Cotton, which will give you an indication of the color of my hair and eyebrows, and Mack, which was short for Mack Truck.

"By God, it's good to have you back," he said, for about the third time. He was leaning against the mantel smoking a cigarette and smiling at me. He was as well dressed as ever. The suit he had on was a gray tweed and had that custom-tailored look and I knew it had cost plenty. He never bought cheap clothes. "It was a shame you couldn't get back here for the Major's funeral. But I told everybody you couldn't get away on account of final exams."

"And nobody laughed in your classic face?" I asked.

"Dammit, Bob, don't be such a porcupine. There's such a thing as being outspoken, but you wear it out."

"O.K.," I said. "I couldn't get away on account of final exams. They have them in April now."

He shook his head in exasperation. "You're hopeless."

"I was just telling him," Mary said, "that he should have gone into the diplomatic service. He'd have been something new."

"The world would have been one big battlefield in a week."

"I'm shy and sensitive by nature," I said, "and don't like to be discussed this way in my presence. Can't we talk about something else?"

"That we can, Handsome," he said. "come along, I want to show you a new gun I just bought. Excuse us, Mary." He led the way up the stairs to the

upper hall and back to his old room, the one he had when we were children.

We went in and he fished into a dresser drawer and hauled out a whisky bottle.

“Is that the gun?” I asked.

“Pour one in and shut up.” He grinned. “And then hand it to me. There’s the gun over in the corner.”

I took a drink and passed him the bottle and looked at the gun. It was a beauty, a Parker double. I went over and picked it up and the feel of it was just right. It had that sweet balance you can get in a shotgun if you don’t care how much money you spend for it.

“I’ll trade you my old gun for it,” I said.

“You’ll be the next queen of Rumania, too. Say, let’s go hunting tomorrow. We haven’t been out together in a hell of a time.”

“Now you’re talking,” I said. “By the way, I got a bird a while ago.” I told him about meeting Sam Harley.

“Speaking of Sam—” He put the bottle down and made waving motions with his hands and whistled ecstatically. “Jesus, sweet Jesus!”

“Why, I didn’t know you and Sam were like that,” I said.

“Shut up, you ugly bastard, and listen. You remember that oldest girl of his, Angelina?”

“I don’t know. Kind of a thin kid, with brown eyes?”

“Yeah, she’s kind of a thin kid, all right. You’ve been gone two years, you sap. And don’t ask me what color her eyes are. Anybody who could look at her and notice her eyes is dead and just hasn’t found it out.”

“Must be great,” I said. “She’s probably all of fifteen.”

“Fifteen, hell. She’s eighteen if she’s a day. Nothing could be put together like that in fifteen years. I’d give seven hundred dollars and my left leg up to the knee for just one piece of that.”

“Well, don’t get in an uproar. What’re you trying to do, marry me off? This is a swell gun, Lee. How’s to use it some tomorrow?”

He had forgotten about the gun. “What gun? Oh, sure. And don’t worry about me trying to promote you with Angelina. You keep your big hams off her. I saw it first.”

I looked at him. He was grinning, but I didn’t like the expression in his eyes. I think he meant some of it.

“Are you nuts? I somehow gathered the impression you were married. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

He held out the bottle. “Have another snort, Grandma, and forget the lecture. We’re not have chapel today.”

I took another drink and tried to forget it. But it was in my mind and wouldn’t go away. And I knew Sam Harley. Better than he did.

Three

That night at supper he turned to me suddenly.

“Say, Bob, I’ve been meaning to write to you about it ever since the Major died, but I couldn’t think how to put it. He treated you pretty rough in his will, but I want you to know I didn’t know a damn thing about it until the lawyer read it.”

“Forget it,” I said, winking at Mary, who was watching me a little worriedly from across the table. “We educated people don’t worry about money all the time. There are other things.”

He laughed. “You educated people! All you ever learned in four years at college was how to twist some poor bastard’s arm out of its socket in the pile-up when you thought nobody was looking.”

We talked until midnight and I went upstairs to bed feeling happy to be home again. I was pleased with their happiness, the way they seemed to be settling down to married life. Of course, they had been married less than a year, but I had always been a little doubtful that Lee would ever marry, or if he did, that he would make a go of it. Somehow, he didn’t seem to be the type for domestication, although that was exactly what he needed. He needed a wife to give him the stability he somehow lacked, and he needed Mary in particular.

Of course, there was no question of its being a success as far as Mary was concerned. She would have married him any time he asked her as far back as I could remember. There had never been anybody else for her. Lee had had girls by the dozen, but somehow he always seemed to come back to her. She was a refuge and a home port for him, and whenever he got into a jam of any kind it was Mary to whom he turned.

Although I was never really in love with Mary myself, she was my personal nomination for the prettiest girl in town and the finest, and I was always proud that I knew her.

There had been an unhappy experience in her childhood that might have thrown lots of girls, but she had come out of it all right. When she was twelve her father had committed suicide, and there had been one of those ugly stories that get started in small towns and never quite the out or come completely out in the open.

John Easterly had been one of the most respected men in town. He was everybody's friend; not a glad-hander or a back-slapper, but a quiet, sober man, dependable and honest and slow-spoken. He was fairly well-to-do by our standards, which is to say he owned his own business and his home and had security for his family. His wife was well liked and everyone knew she was devoted to him. He went to church regularly in his steady way and was active in its affairs. His was the well-ordered and unspectacular life that millions of men like him have lived and enjoyed. And yet he had gone quietly out to the woodshed behind the house one spring night after Mary and her mother had gone to bed and hanged himself. There was no note, no explanation, no reason.

Of course, the town had been horrified. And then the buzzing started. Those "business trips" of his to Dallas. Hadn't they been more frequent lately? And then, of course, at the funeral, there had been the inevitable "mysterious woman in black." Only in this case there actually had been a woman. Not in black, but she was there. Lee and I had gone to the funeral with the Major, and I saw her there in the back. She was young, I remembered. And her face had been white and there was a bitter hopelessness in her eyes as she came in and sat in the last row while the service was going on, looking straight ahead and ignoring the whispering and cautious craning of necks and the faintly hostile glances. She hadn't been in mourning and she left as soon as the church service was over and nobody ever knew where she came from or where she went.

Mary's mother had died less than a year after that. The store and the big house had been sold and Mary and her grandmother lived in a small white bungalow on Cherokee Street near the high school. There had been enough money to keep them comfortably and for Mary to go on to college when she was ready and to study music for two years afterward. She loved music. It was as much a part of her as the flaming red hair and the cool gray-green eyes that always seemed to be slightly amused by something.

I grinned a little as I thought of what she must think, with her love and understanding of music, of the family into which she had married. The Cranes were musically illiterate. That was the term she used herself. Since my mother had died there hadn't been anyone in the family who knew or cared anything about it. Neither Lee nor I could recognize good music when we heard it, and the Major had had nothing but boundless contempt for musicians of any description. "Long-haired bunch of sissy bastards" was the way he disposed of them.

I put on my pajamas and turned out the light and lay there a long time thinking of the days when Lee and I were growing up in this old house. Older and smoother than I, and with that quick charm of his, he had many times helped to lighten for me the consequences of my pigheaded rebelliousness and the Major's hard rule. For some reason the Major, normally suspicious of everybody, would stretch a point to believe Lee and to see his side of it.

I remembered the time when I was about thirteen and had played hookey from school with another boy and had gone out in the country all day to hunt rabbits with our .22's. We had, in taking along a recently acquired young setter bitch the Major had penned up in the back yard, committed two unpardonable sins, but we were too young and too careless to know it or to worry about it. I returned home at sunset to find the Major waiting for me on the back porch, his big face dark with wrath.

I saw Lee come out of the kitchen door just as the Major slapped me alongside the head with his open hand, a stinging blow that made my ears ring and brought tears to my eyes. He was a big man and the clout rocked me and hurt.

"Who told you you could run rabbits with that bitch?" he roared. "And what in the name of hell did you think I had her penned up for, you little fool? Don't you know she's in heat, and now every mongrel in the county's had a crack at her? When she has 'em, I ought to take the whole goddamned litter and tie 'em around your neck."

Between the fright and the unreasoning anger his outbursts always aroused in me, I was speechless and intent only on backing away and trying to keep out of his reach, but Lee came to my rescue.

"I don't think it makes much difference, Dad," he said quietly, with that unusual poise he had for one only seventeen. "That bitch hasn't got much of

a nose.”

The Major turned his attention to Lee momentarily. “Who says she hasn’t?” he demanded truculently.

“I’ve had her out twice and both times she’s gone right over birds. Something’s wrong with her.”

“You sure of that?”

“Well, when that old pointer of Billy Gordon’s can find birds behind her, three times that I know of . . .” Lee said, shrugging and letting it trail off suggestively.

The Major grunted suspiciously, but he growled something about getting rid of her, and then glared once more at me and went in the house and slammed the door.

Lee grinned at me and slapped me on the shoulder and I knew then he hadn’t hunted with the dog at all. He could think fast when the heat was on.

The only time the Major ever really cracked down on Lee was that same year, and it was over that affair with Sharon Rankin, the married woman he had run off to New Orleans with.

The woman had been only twenty-three and I guess pretty wild herself, and she had been married only about a year to Rankin, who was a teller at the bank. As I remembered her now, she was one of those extra-thin blondes who look so ethereal with their untroubled eyes and clear, transparent complexions, who can drink the average man deaf, dumb, and blind, and then look as dewy and fresh the next morning as an armful of lilies. I never could understand, and neither could anybody else, why she should want to run off with a seventeen-year-old boy, but I guess she knew what she was doing. At least, she made enough fuss when they caught up with the two of them and took Lee away from her.

The police picked them up in New Orleans, living at the St. Charles and going to the races every day. Neither Rankin nor the girl had ever come back home again. Lee had never talked about it and in all the years since I had never learned any more about it, except that sometimes when he was very drunk he mentioned her name. “Sharon liked horses,” he said once when we were alone in the back of Billy Gordon’s café and he was so drunk he couldn’t stand and I was trying to get him out of there before Billy’s so-called rye killed him. “She said horses mos’ beautiful animal in the world.”

That ended high school for him. The Major sent him off to military school at midterm, the first of a succession of them. He ran out of them as blithely as quicksilver out of a straw hat and turned up in the most unpredictable places.

I remembered the cold December night during my second year in high school when I awakened to find him leaning over me in the dark room with a match burning in his hand. He was shaking me by the shoulder and grinning and when I sat up he motioned for silence. He had on the military-school uniform and it was dirty and thick with coal dust from the gondola car he had been riding. He wanted to borrow some money and had taken the last I had, which was ten dollars, and then had collected some breeches and boots and a heavy windbreaker out of his room, gathered up his shotgun and a .32-caliber revolver he owned, and disappeared again, making me promise I wouldn't tell where he was going. It wasn't until after he had gone back into the black norther and the spitting rain and I lay there thinking about him that I realized that I didn't know where he was going. He had made me promise not to tell, and then hadn't told me. It was two weeks before they found him this time. He was living with a half-wild trapper in the Sabine River bottoms, a drunken old swamp rat who was believed to be slightly crazy and known to be dangerous, and who had once served fifteen years for killing a bottom-land farmer in a fight over a rowboat.

It was several years later that I happened to run into the deputy sheriff who had gone in there to bring Lee out, acting on a tip that a boy answering Lee's description had been seen hanging around with Old Man Epps. The deputy, who had been in World War I, said it sounded like the second battle of the Marne as he walked up to the dilapidated old shack. He'd had to leave his car several miles back because of mudholes in the swamp road. He said he had been as scared as he had ever been in his life, walking up to the shanty and hearing the guns roaring and seeing pieces of rotten oak flying off the roof in the rain. When he finally screwed up his courage to the point of looking in the window, he saw Lee and Old Man Epps lying side by side on a pair of canvas cots and Epps as drunk as a lord, and both of them shooting, Lee with his .32 and Epps with an Army .45, at a frantic rat scurrying back and forth across the rafters. Every time they would shoot,

another hole would appear in the roof and more rain would come in and Old Man Epps would curse sulphurously and Lee would laugh.

When the deputy started to take Lee away, the old man had shown fight. “Jest say the word, Buck, an’ I’ll blow this stinkin’ law’s guts all over the Sabine bottoms. You don’t have to go back to no goddamned school if’n you don’t want to.”

I grinned now in the darkness. The people who had loved him! From the flower-like Sharon to that old goat. He was wild and undependable, but he knew how to make people like him.

Four

The speedometer of the big roadster climbed up to sixty as we came over the crest of Five Mile Hill. I watched it as we started down. It went to sixty-five and then seventy, and then it hovered just under seventy-five. Lee lounged behind the wheel in a big hunting coat and fished in a pocket for a cigarette, brought out a lighter, and snapped it, and for a brief instant the little flame lit up the lean Indian face and the polished smoothness of the brown head. He grinned at me around the cigarette and winked and said, "We'll knock 'em dead, son," and went on trying to hum "The Sweetheart of Sigma Chi." He couldn't carry a tune any more than I could.

It was in the cold half-light of dawn, with a growing strip of pink in the east, and the Buick seemed the only thing alive. The countryside was still and ghostly under a heavy mantle of frost. The side curtains were up on the car but still I had to shove my hands in my pockets to keep them warm. When we crossed the little creek bottom below the Eiler's place there were patches of low-lying and filmy mist that hugged the ground and were torn apart and swirled into the boiling red dust behind us. We left the loose boards of the old wooden bridge ringing their complaining clatter on the still air of the morning, and shot noiselessly up the hill where I had met Sam Harley, the car eating up the miles of the clay and gravel road like a red-tailed projectile.

There had been an argument before we started. I had wanted to go out to the old Crane farm and hunt over it so I could have a look at the buildings and the land at the same time. The farm was mine now and I wanted to see what kind of shape it was in, but Lee had insisted that we come this way. I couldn't understand why, but had given in to him. I found out later what the attraction was over here.

Mike sat between us, peering out interestedly through the windshield at the scenery flashing past. He would be a surprised dog, I thought, if he ever rode with anybody else and found out that cars can travel at thirty and forty

miles an hour. He turned and licked Lee on the face. Lee cuffed him on the head while we swept around a long curve with that delicately balanced feeling you have just before the car begins to skid.

"You old cold-nosed bastard, I'll throw you out and make you walk," he said affectionately.

He stopped the car and turned it around and parked off the road on top of a long hill five miles beyond. I got out on the side of the road and old Mike jumped down and went racing around in ecstatic circles.

"Go get 'em, Mike," Lee said, and slapped him playfully in the ribs.

Mike gave him a look of sheer adoration and cleared the burrow pit beside the road with one bound and disappeared down the rows of old cornstalks and pea vines that lay downhill. We loaded the guns and followed.

The sun was just coming up over the top of a far-off ridge to the east and it felt good on my back and strung the frosty vines with diamonds, and the red-gold shafts of light broke against the far hill ahead of us in a spreading extravagance of color among the dogwood and hickory and red oak. October's blue haze of smoke was in the air and the unforgettable smell of it was in our nostrils, and our breath was steamy in the absolutely still air.

"He's found birds," Lee said happily. I looked up ahead and saw Mike had slowed and was coming along the edge of the field stealthily and his very pose said as plain as words, "They're here. And close." Then he stiffened in a point.

It was a small covey and they got up from the pea vines almost at our feet, half a dozen or so small brown-feathered bombs that ripped the hush of the morning apart with their explosion. Lee knocked one down with an effortless swing of his gun, but I was jumpy and missed with both barrels, missed clean without drawing a feather, which is the only way to miss if you have to.

"I used to know a guy once," Lee said gravely as Mike brought up his bird and he stowed it in the game pocket.

"Yeah? You did?"

"Quite a hunter, this guy was. And what he always did was to shoot at the birds. Or at least in their general direction."

"All right, all right." I grinned. "So I missed one."

“You missed one?” He grabbed my coat collar and shook it affectionately. “Why, you big Swede, you couldn’t hit a Jersey cow in the ass with an ironing board.”

And that was the way it went most of the morning. Mike would find the birds, we would kick them out, Lee would get one and sometimes a clean double, and I would miss. By noon I had only two birds in the game pocket of my coat. I couldn’t get the old swing back, and Lee kidded me unmercifully.

“They went that way, mister,” he would shout excitedly, pointing after a vanishing covey after I had missed two shots on the rise.

All hunters have days like that, even exceptional shots, and I have lots of them, so I didn’t mind. The day was beautiful and it was all right just to be out with Lee like this after an absence of two years.

He was in high spirits. “Damn it, Bob,” he said, “I’m sure glad you’re back. We’ve missed you around here. I don’t see why you couldn’t have gone to some school around home. They’re always just as much in the market for beef as that place you went. And I always wished you and the Major could have got together some way.”

“Well,” I said, “it was just one of those things.”

“I think it got to worrying him the last year. The way the two of you had split up, I mean. He used to ask me right often if I’d heard from you.”

“He did?” I tried to work up some interest in it, but it was pretty thin.

“You missed a lot of fun, Bob.” He stopped and lit a cigarette and grinned at me in the sunlight. “Don’t go so fast. We’re not hunting birds for a living.

“But you did miss a lot of fun,” he went on. “You know how much money he used to give me when I was going to Rice. And the parties we used to throw the last few years before he died, when I was working for him. That last one, in Houston, sweet Jesus! He had a whole suite of rooms at the Rice Hotel and I don’t know how much whisky—the real McCoy, too, no moonshine—and I had all the telephone numbers from the days when I was going to school down there. And for a man who was crowding fifty, he was quite a lad with the gals. A little on the salty side, especially when he’d had a couple of snorts, and sometimes they didn’t quite know how to take him, but he was a good sport. You remember how he used to be sometimes when he’d had too much, he’d think about when he was in

France with the Engineers, and he'd start talking French to the girls, and it's a damn good thing none of 'em ever understood anything he was saying. And then he'd sing the Engineers' song, you know, the one about 'Oh, the Engineers, with hairy ears, they live in caves and ditches,' and when he'd come to the third line it was a little too rough for some of 'em unless they had a snootful too, and if they got too snotty about it he'd let out a roar and say, 'Lee, take these goddamn campfire girls back to their sorority house and go down on Congress Avenue and dig us up some women with guts,' and then I'd have to pacify everybody all over again."

"You must have had your hands full," I said absently. I was trying to keep an eye on Mike, who was cutting around the edge of a blackberry patch.

"I'll say I did. And say, speaking of girls—"

"We were?" I said. "What are girls?"

"Speaking of girls, you sap, I want to take you out to Sam's sometime soon so you can see this Angelina. Until you see that, you haven't lived, I'm telling you."

"Lay off," I said. "Forget this Angelina stuff. You know what Sam Harley'd do if he caught you fooling around with one of his girls."

"What a sucker!" He grinned. "If I ever get a chance to get into that, d'you think I'm going to do it on the courthouse lawn and give out invitations to everybody in the country?"

"For Christ's sake, Lee," I said. "Quit talking like that. You'll have me believing you mean it before long."

"O.K.," he said. "O.K., Grandma. But when you see her, don't say I didn't warn you. There's a lot of fun there in one pair of flour-sack pants, for the guy that can get it."

"Speaking of sport," I said, "did you ever hunt any quail? Now, back where I come from, it's a lot of fun. You have a dog, see, and a shotgun; and this dog goes out and finds the birds—"

"All right, all right. Maybe we had better get going, or I'll be whinnying and pawing the ground, just thinking about her. Let's go."

We would hunt over a field and then move the car down the road to another bit of good cover and go over that. By noon we were close to the field where I had met Sam Harley the day before. We started across a piece of pastureland near the road, headed for a spring branch below, where we

could eat the sandwiches we had brought. Mike found a big covey of quail in the blackberries along an old fence row and Lee connected again. I shot and missed.

"Now, you take croquet. That's a nice game I could recommend," Lee said as we sat down at the base of a big oak beside the spring. "I knew a man once. Just like you in a lot of ways. Had eleven thumbs and three left feet and he got to be a hell of a player. Maybe All-American."

"You certainly know a lot of people," I said. "Any of 'em named Joe?"

"Sure. All of 'em. Joe's a nice name."

"Had a kind of green mole on the left side of his face, just under the eye?"

"No. This guy had an aunt named Irma who used to dance at Elk stag parties."

I shook my head. "Must be another guy."

"You're nuts. I'm glad you're home, but you're nuts."

I threw a chunk of rotten wood at him and he ducked and it went into the spring and splashed a little water on Mike, who looked at us sitting there on the ground laughing like hyenas. He whined eagerly deep in his throat and started up out of the ravine, padding noiselessly on the damp brown leaves where the frost had melted, and his manner clearly indicated that he'd had enough of this stalling around and thought we should get back to the pressing business of hunting birds.

Lee whistled at him. "Don't work so hard, Mike," he said. "You'll just get promoted to a better job and then you'll have worries."

He lay back at full length on the steep incline of the bank, with an arm crooked under the back of his head to keep it off the wet ground and leaves. The sunlight of a cloudless autumn day poured through an opening in the trees above and he stretched lazily in the warm rays and bit enormously into a sandwich.

"This is the life," he said.

It was, all right, I agreed silently. And I was happy to see him enjoying it so much and I tried to pretend to myself that I didn't know he would be bored with it before the day was over. There wasn't enough excitement in hunting quail to keep him interested for a full day.

After lunch we went on down the road and stopped to hunt over the field where I had met Sam yesterday. But, as I had known, he began losing

interest in it. He didn't kid me any more about the shots I missed and he took less and less pleasure from even the difficult ones he completed.

The silence between us lengthened out. I tried to keep him going by bringing up people we knew and funny things that had happened, but it was no use. He was growing moody and irritable.

By two o'clock we were down by the little creek at the lower end of the big Eilers field and the car was a long way back, a mile or more. Beyond the creek was a wooded ridge and I remembered that there were a few scattered sandy fields and open pastures up on top of it but that it wasn't good bird country. I couldn't understand why Lee kept turning in that direction.

"There's no use in crossing the creek," I said. "Let's go back to the car."

"Oh, come on. There are some fields up there, over by Sam Harley's house."

I began to see the light, but I followed him. There wasn't anything else to do. He had the car keys. And he was already crossing the creek on the foot log, and he stalked across the swampy bottom without looking back.

"I'll tell you," I said, "you and Mike go on along the ridge here, cutting back toward the highway, and I'll go back and pick up the car and meet you."

"No," he said shortly. "It's only a quarter mile on to Sam's. Let's go on over there and get a drink and he'll drive us out to the car. I want to pick up a quart."

I shrugged. "O.K."

It was easy to see now where the hunting trip was going.

Five

We came out of the scrub pine and there in the clearing with the sun behind it was Sam's place, quiet and apparently deserted. It hadn't changed any in the two years since I had seen it. The sandy road ran on past it and turned to the left beyond the barn, going on down toward the big bottom country behind the place, and there was a wire gate leading into the close-cropped cow pasture surrounding the house and farm buildings. The house was still the same, the unfinished pine boards silvery gray with age and weather. A large mud and stone chimney stood solidly against the south wall, and there was a long "gallery" extending the width of the house in front.

On beyond the house was the barn and the corn crib and the cow lot enclosed in stripped pine sapling poles, a wagon shed and a crazily leaning rough-board shed where Sam kept his Ford, a big woodpile, and a little well house covered with gray oak shakes.

There was no sign of life. The door of the shed was closed and we couldn't see whether the car was there or not. We stopped at the front gate and looked around.

"Hello in there! Hey, Sam!" Lee called experimentally.

"They're all in town," I said. "It's Saturday evening."

"Not like Sam." Lee shook his head. "He doesn't go to town much."

"Well, let's go," I said. "No use hanging around here."

"I wonder where he keeps the whisky," Lee said.

"Well, not in the house. That's a cinch."

"We might take a look around."

"Sure," I said. "The sheriff has been trying to find it for ten years, so we'll just walk right into it."

Lee swore disgustedly and we had turned to go when I heard the front door open.

Angelina Harley stood there in the doorway, looking out at us. I don't know how I knew it was Angelina unless it was what I saw on Lee's face

when he turned around. I knew then it wasn't Sam he had been hoping to see.

She came out on the porch. "What did you want?" she asked. There was no friendliness in her eyes or any word of greeting; just the question.

Her eyes were on Lee and I doubt that she knew I was there, but I felt compelled to reply. Any answer from Lee would have been superfluous anyway. She could see what he wanted. Not that she seemed to mind.

"We were looking for Sam," I said. "Is he home?"

So this was Angelina. This was the scrawny little girl with the thin arms and legs and chapped knees and the wide, frightened brown eyes I remembered. I felt myself growing uncomfortable and tried to take my eyes off her.

It wasn't that she had grown so much. She wasn't big, even now. But it was as if she had received twenty-five pounds or so in the mail with instructions to put it on where she thought she needed it most.

She had on an old cotton dress that she had outgrown in every direction and overwhelmed until it had completely surrendered its cheap shapelessness and lay taut across her hips and breasts in obedient submission, and it was obvious she had on practically nothing underneath that dominated and slavish garment and that she didn't give a damn.

Her hair was blonde, a little too dark to be called golden, but you could see it was natural, and it was long, thrown back over her shoulders, straight and fine-spun and silky and slightly damp, and it was obvious she had just washed it and had been drying it in the sun in the back yard, for she had an old blue bath towel pinned across her shoulders.

I learned later that her hair was long because Sam wouldn't stand for her bobbing it. Sam was pretty strong for the Scriptures, aside from his whisky-making, and there wasn't anything in there about women cutting off their hair. I was to learn that and a lot of other things about this girl before I was very much older.

Her eyes were slightly almond-shaped and brown, but they weren't soft, as brown eyes usually are, but rather there was in them an almost indefinable expression of smoldering defiance. They seemed to be at once sullen and shy. The face was a little too broad and the full lips too near pouting for beauty, and the whole thing too lacking in animation for charm,

but she was damned pretty, or she would have been if she'd had anything in her eyes but that to-hell-with-you stare.

She answered me, still looking at Lee. "No. He's hauling up some wood. But he ought to be here pretty soon."

Lee wasn't saying anything. He was just looking at her, and I'd never seen him act like that around a girl. Usually he just moved in on them like Stuart's Cavalry. There seemed to be something about her that threw him off his stride. His face was shiny with sweat and he couldn't seem to be able to get his mouth closed.

"Do you mind if we wait for him?" I asked.

"No. I guess not, if you want to."

We pushed through the gate and came up and sat down on the porch, one on each side of the steps, with our backs against the four-by-four posts that supported the roof.

"I wonder if we could have a drink of water?" I asked. For some reason I wanted to get her to talk, if I could. I couldn't figure her out. And the silence between the three of us was oppressive and all that naked staring was making me uncomfortable. I tried to keep my eyes off her, for I knew the way I was looking at her and it embarrassed me slightly, even though it didn't seem to bother her at all.

"I guess so," she said ungraciously. "Wait here and I'll bring you some."

When she had disappeared inside the house, moving with an effortless grace, Lee looked across at me.

"Jesus Christ," he said softly. "Oh, Jesus."

"Let's get going," I said. "You can see Sam some other time."

He didn't hear me.

She came back out with a wooden bucket full of water and a long-handled gourd dipper and put it down on the porch between us and then went over and curled up in the porch swing, tugging once carelessly and ineffectually at the skimpy dress. She had on an old pair of house slippers with no stockings, and her legs were long and smooth and tanned, and the too short and too thin dress did nothing to cover them. I looked out across the cow pasture to where Mike was investigating a gopher hole. I didn't want to sit there and stare at her like the bald-headed row at a burlesque show.

That silence settled down over us again. As I sat there and tried to pretend an interest in the dog I could feel the two of them looking at each other.

I didn't like it. Not that I cared what they did, for it wasn't any of my business. But I knew something about those backwoods men like Sam and knew how they regarded outsiders who tried to fool around with their womenfolks. Sam was soft-spoken and a little shy in the presence of strangers, but I remembered that when I was a boy I used to go to court sometimes when my grandfather was on jury duty and listen to the cases, and I had seen men on trial for brutal and ruthless murder and some of them had been soft-spoken and a little shy of bearing.

I was remembering other things, too. Remembering Sam's telling me one night when we were coon hunting long ago and were sitting around a fire down in the Black Creek bottoms there behind the house that Angelina was going to be a schoolteacher. She was a right smart girl and she made good grades in her books and she was going to amount to something, he had said in that way of his of not wanting to appear boastful before outsiders but with the quiet pride showing through nevertheless. Sam thought a lot of his oldest daughter, and anybody— especially any married man—he caught fooling around with her was going to be in one hell of a bad spot mighty fast. I felt cold down between my shoulder blades as though there were a draft blowing up my back. I wished Sam would come on so we could get the whisky and get out of here.

It was Angelina who broke the silence. "What did you want to see Papa about?"

"We wanted to ask him if it was O.K. To hunt across the place," I said,

"I know what you want. You're after whisky."

I turned quickly and looked at her. I knew Sam had always been careful to keep his moonshining activities away from his family. She said it flatly and distastefully and she had that sulky challenge in her eyes, as though she dared me to deny it.

"What makes you think that?" I asked.

"That's all you town people would come out here for. That's all anybody comes here for."

"How do you know?"

“Oh, I know all about it. He thinks I don’t, but I’ve known about it a long time. Moonshiner!” There was a biting scorn in her voice.

“Well, what’s wrong with that?” I asked. “Lots of people make it. And not as good as Sam’s, either.”

“Does your papa make it?”

“No,” I said. “But he drank more of it than Sam has ever made.”

“And I guess that ain’t something a whole lot different, is it?”

“Well, I’ve never given it any thought. Is it?”

“You know damn well it is. How’d you like to live out here on this backwoods farm and not ever go to town because your papa was a moonshiner, and you never had any friends because you knew that everybody knew it and talked about you behind your back?”

Oh, hell, I thought. I was beginning to get a little tired of Angelina. She had a body that would make a dead man come back to life, but her conversation got on your nerves. The very idea of anyone who looked like that feeling sorry for herself was ridiculous.

“How old are you?” I asked. Anything to change the subject.

“Eighteen.”

I was sure she was stretching it a little, but I didn’t say anything.

“When are you going to go to Teachers College?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t got enough credits yet. And I haven’t got enough money saved up.”

She began to be a little less sullen then, as though Teachers College interested her. Maybe she does have other hobbies beside waving that chassis in your face and not liking her father, I thought. I just didn’t like her.

After a minute she asked, “Did either one of you-all ever go to Teachers College?”

“No,” I said. “Why?”

She hesitated a little as though undecided whether to go on. She looked down at the floor between us.

“I was just wondering if you knew what kind of clothes the girls wore down there.”

I was conscious of the traditional male helplessness when confronted with this type of question. Before I could think of anything to say she slid out of the swing with a flashing display of long bare legs and was gone inside the door.

She came back almost at once, carrying the mail-order catalogue of some clothing company. She sat down between us on the steps and opened it immediately to the pages she wanted. It was wilted and dog-eared from constant handling.

“Do they look like any of these?” she asked hesitantly.

She was so damned near. I could feel the buttoned-up collar of my wool shirt choking me and I didn’t want to say anything for fear of the way my voice would sound. As she leaned forward over the catalogue stray tendrils of that blonde hair were almost in my face, and to look down at the pictures she was pointing out I had to look past some of the places she was fighting with that dress.

I tried to concentrate on the pictures. They were the usual mannikins of catalogues, standing in that pose they all have with one foot pointing out to the side for some reason, and the dresses and suits they had on looked just like any other dresses and suits to me.

“Well?” she asked. “Which ones do you like? Like college girls wear?”

I muttered something lamely and pretended to study them again. I could hold her off in my mind when she was sullen, and throwing all that stuff around and daring you to look at it, and when she was whining, but when she got up against me like this and dropped the challenge and was just a girl asking for help she got me and hit me hard. Not liking her didn’t help any.

“Here, let me look.” It was Lee on the other side of her, and he slid over slightly. “I can pick out just the thing for you.” His voice was normal and his tone confident and I could see he was regaining control of the situation. This was a girl he could understand.

She switched the catalogue over toward his side and looked up at him hopefully and I slipped off the porch steps and walked out into the yard, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. I noticed how my fingers were shaking. “God damn her anyway,” I swore under my breath. The faint stirring of breeze out in the yard felt good on my face.

I could hear Lee’s voice going on behind me, gathering momentum and confidence with every word. He was getting back into gear again.

“Now you take this one,” he was saying, and it was the world’s greatest authority on girls’ clothes speaking. “This isn’t your type. The lines are all wrong. It’s too conservative. You want something with more dash and snap to it.”

What a line of crap, I thought. You and your goddamned dash and snap. What do you know about women's clothes?

But it didn't scare me so much now. He sounded more like the Lee I knew. He was working on her, all right, but he seemed to have regained some measure of sanity. He didn't remind me so much of a stallion getting ready to kick his stall apart. He'd try to make her sometime, but maybe he'd have sense enough not to get himself killed. Unless he got drunk. And then I felt the cold wind again.

When they had the clothes question settled to their satisfaction, they moved up into the porch swing and went on talking. I went back and sat down on the steps. There wasn't anywhere else to go and I could see Lee wasn't going to leave.

"Your name is Lee Crane, isn't it?" she asked, with a sidewise glance at him.

"Yes." He nodded. "I know yours, all right. But how'd you know me?"

"Oh, I've seen you come out here a lot of times to see Papa. And a girl I know told me your name one time when I saw you in town. You were in a big car."

"I wish I'd seen you. I would have taken you for a drive."

"I wish you had too," she said. "Who is he?"

She meant me. A gracious little bag, I thought sourly. I wondered why she didn't point and say, "What is that?"

"My kid brother, Bob," Lee said, and I saw a flicker of amusement in his eyes as he looked at me.

"Your brother? Why, he don't look anything like you."

The way she said it left little doubt as to what she meant. How could such a homely character be a brother of the gorgeous Lee Crane? And I liked being discussed in the third person that way. I could see that Angelina and I were going to be great buddies.

"Do you go to many dances?" Lee asked.

"No."

"Why not? It's a lot of fun."

"I never go anywhere. He won't let me!" she said hotly.

Lee was tenderly sympathetic. "That's a darn shame. A lovely young girl like you should go to lots of parties. Don't you think it's a shame, Bob?"

“Yes,” I said. “What a shame!”

She gave me a dirty look.

“I suppose you think it’s fun being shut up all the time on this damn stinkin’ farm?”

“I didn’t say so,” I said. “But there could be worse places.”

“That’s what you think.”

“O.K.,” I said. “That’s what I think.”

“I suppose you think a girl oughtn’t to have any fun?”

“What the hell do I care?” I said.

“Aw, lay off, Bob,” Lee put in protestingly. “Never mind him, Angelina. He’s all right when you get to know him.”

“Well, I don’t want to get to know him. He hasn’t got any more sense than a mule. And he looks like one.”

I got off the porch and walked out into the yard again. I don’t know why she got on my nerves so much.

I looked down the road and saw Sam coming up from the bottom with his load of wood. I was glad to see him and called back to Lee and pointed.

Sam drew up alongside the big woodpile in back of the house and Angelina gathered up her catalogue and went inside.

“Hello, Sam,” I said.

“Howdy, Bob,” he answered quietly. “Been doin’ a little bird huntin’?” I saw him shoot a fast look across the yard to where Lee was, coming from the front of the house.

We offered to pitch off the wood while he went and got us the quart. He never would let anybody go with him when he went to the place where he kept it cached.

While we were up on the loaded wagon heaving the big fireplace logs off onto the pile, Angelina came out of the house and headed for the well with her water bucket. She passed us without a word but I guess she could feel Lee’s eyes on her, for as she went by she gave him that long slow look out of the side of her eyes.

“She ought to be against the law,” Lee said slowly and shakily as she disappeared inside the house. He was getting that look again.

“She is,” I said. “A little law about contributing to the delinquency of minors.”

“She’s eighteen. You heard her say it. She’s no minor.”

I shrugged. "Sam would kill you."

"It'd be worth it."

"Like hell it'd be worth it. There isn't any of it worth that much."

"Not if you stop to think about it, no. But how're you going to stop and think when you see her?"

I didn't say anything.

And don't try to give me any of that crap that she doesn't affect you the same way. I saw you get up from there and sidle away. You couldn't take it either."

"O.K., I said "O.K. So she does it to me too. But you can stay dead a long time."

"What the hell, don't be such a sap. I'll bet she's not any virgin. The way she waves it around, somebody's gettin' to it."

"Yeah," I said. "I know. But who's going to explain that to Sam? If you get caught, I mean, or she gets knocked up. I guess you would? Or maybe you think she will she'll just say, 'Why, Papa, he's just one of the crowd. I haven't got any enemies.' Like hell she will."

"Oh, shut up, will you? You preach too much."

Six

By the time we had the wood thrown off, Sam was back from his cache. He stopped behind the corn crib, where we could see him but he couldn't be seen from the house, and motioned to us.

"I didn't want to tote it across to you there in the open," he said when we got there, and he nodded toward the house, where Angelina was. I thought of the contemptuous way she had said, "Moonshiner!" and felt a little sorry for him. He wasn't fooling that girl any.

"One of you boys can tote it out in your game pocket."

"Sure," Lee said. He paid Sam for it. "But let's go inside here and have a snort. How about it, Sam?"

Sam hesitated slightly, and then he nodded. We climbed through the small door into the crib and closed it after us again. I wondered what all the secrecy was about. What was Angelina supposed to think we were doing down here? Playing a three-handed game of bridge?

The crib was built of split logs with the flat sides inside and it was cool and dim and dusty in there, with a narrow shaft of sunlight slanting in here and there from the west side between the logs. The unhusked corn was piled high toward the back in a steep slope and there was a little cleared space by the door. We hunkered down there with our backs against the sloping wall of corn and Lee twisted loose the fruit-jar lid. He held it out to Sam.

"Go ahead," Sam said politely.

"The first today," Lee said and took a big swallow, holding the wide-mouthed jar with both hands. He made a shuddering face and expelled his breath in a long "Whooooof!"

I took a drink, not wanting it and disliking the breath-catching and slightly gagging smell of it in the wide mouth of the jar, but obliged to abide by the rules governing these rites. If three men have a bottle, all three must drink. It was good, as moonshine goes, but I just couldn't see the

necessity for it at this time of day, out in the country like this on a hunting trip.

Sam tilted it back and took a long drink without changing expression. He might have been drinking water. Lee hurriedly gulped another and passed the jar to me again.

“You get many birds?” Sam asked.

“About a dozen,” Lee said. “Old Big-and-Ugly here was blowin’ holes in the air and I had to get ‘em for him.”

Sam nodded and smiled a little self-consciously at me. “Well, ev’body has an off day now an’ then.”

“Have another jolt,” Lee said

“Well, I don’t know,” Sam said slowly. Then he picked up the ax. “Jest one. Then I got to unhitch the mules.”

“Through hauling wood for the day?” Lee asked in surprise. It was only about three-thirty.

“Well, I had thought I might get in another load, but I guess not. Might put me kinda late with the chores. Reckon I’ll unhitch.”

I reckon you will too, I thought. Unhitch and stick around. You’re not going back down there in the bottom and leave two potential drunks wallowing around in your corn crib with a quart of moonshine and that girl wandering around loose. You might as well go off and leave an untended bonfire in a gasoline refinery. I’ll bet you’ll be a happy man the day she’s married and some other poor bastard can watch her.

I could feel the two drinks warming me and I was conscious of the old illusion that about two drinks always give you of seeing everything more clearly. And the thing I saw more clearly than anything else was that I’d better start working on Lee to get him out of here before he got too much. You never could tell what it was going to do to him.

“We’d better get started back,” I said. “It’s a long way out to the car.”

“Plenty of time. Keep your shirt on,” he replied with a vague irritation.

Sam got up and let himself out to attend to the team. He gave us a disturbed look as he left. He didn’t like it a bit. It was plain on his face in spite of the way he tried to cover it up. And I could see his reasons. If you’re making and selling booze in a dry county, there’s no surer way of getting yourself in jail than by letting your customers drink it on the premises and get a load on to advertise where they got it. And Sam had a lot

of strict, old-fashioned family virtues. He didn't think his home was any place for people to get drunk, but he didn't like to say anything. After all, Lee was a good customer. And, too, the code of hospitality ingrained in men like Sam would never permit him to ask anyone to leave his place. Backwoods people just weren't like that. They might rip your belly open if anything unpleasant started, but they couldn't ask you to leave.

"You're mashing those birds in your pocket," I said. Lee was lying back on the corn with the quail in the game pocket under him.

"The hell with the birds. The world is full of birds."

"And I'd better point out another thing. We're wearing out our welcome around here. Fast. Sam makes whisky, but he's not running a bar. We'd better get going."

"I paid him for the rotgut, didn't I? Do I have to ask him where I can drink it?" His face was becoming redder and I could see the stuff working on him.

I didn't say anything.

"Did you ever see such a shape in your life?" he asked.

"Sam? I guess he's not my type."

"Oh, for Christ's sake! You and your goddamned stale jokes. You know who I mean."

"O.K.," I said, "I know who you mean."

"I wonder if she really wants it that bad. Or if she's just dumb."

"Why don't you ask Sam? If you'll just talk a little louder he can hear you."

"Look," he said, setting down the jar and staring at me with disgust. "I'm getting a little sick of hearing about Sam. The sneaky bastard. Why doesn't he get on with his work and quit spying around here?"

It was getting bad. And I knew there wasn't anything I could do about it. It wasn't his getting ugly, or the fact that he might start trouble with Harley by trying to pick a fight or cursing him or something, that worried me. Sam would probably just charge that off to a bad drunk who couldn't handle his liquor. At least, I hoped he would. But the thing that scared me was Lee's sitting here getting drunker and drunker with that girl inflaming his mind. I'd seen drunks with something on their minds before. Pretty soon, about the time everything else began to close down for him, there'd be nothing left but the girl.

It would be easy to reach over and take the stuff away from him and throw it out the door. They didn't call me Mack Truck for nothing. I thought of doing it and wondered why I didn't, but deep down inside I knew why. It was the thought of facing his ridicule when he sobered up and I had to explain why I'd done it. It would look so silly and old-womanish then. It's funny, I thought, how you're afraid of a lot of things all your life, but the thing you always fear most is ridicule.

In a little while we heard Sam going by outside and then drawing water for the mules.

"Hey, Sam," Lee called. There was no answer. He shouted even louder. "Sam! Come in here!"

He turned and stared intently at me as though trying to fix me in his mind. He frowned and weaved slightly from side to side and you could see he was having trouble bringing me into focus. The stuff was working on him rapidly. He'd only had about six drinks.

"Jesus, but you're a homely bastard. Where'd you ever get a face like that?"

Maybe it would be easier if I got a little edge on myself, I thought. I reached for the jar and took a drink.

"You ought to take that face out somewhere and bury it. You look like a gorilla. Does it hurt?"

"This is what is known as a good, clean, wholesome face," I said. "I'm a good, clean, wholesome American youth."

"You're a good, clean, wholesome sonofabitch. Always worryin' about something. What're you worryin' about now, Grandma?"

"All right," I said. "I'm always worrying about something."

"But right now. What're you worryin' about right now?"

"Nothing."

"Must be something. You wouldn't be complete without that face and something to worry about."

I didn't say anything. He kept on staring at me owlishly, with that scowl of concentration screwing up his face.

"Why don't you worry some more about Titsy out there? Whether she's goin' to throw one of 'em right out through that dress sometime? Or whether she's goin' to get what she's looking for?"

I can see why you get in so many fights, I thought. I can just guess how far you get with that stuff with somebody who doesn't love you for what you are when you're all there.

'Did you ever see anything like it?' he asked. Every time he stopped talking for a minute and then started in again, it was about the same thing.

"Why don't you and Sam take the guns and go off hunting for a while?"

I didn't say anything, so he yelled for Sam again. "Hey, Sam!"

In a minute the door opened and Sam looked in. There was still that uneasiness in his black eyes.

"Sam, you old devil, where you been?" Lee shouted at him. "Come on in and have a drink."

Sam climbed in and squatted down on his heels by the door. Lee kept saying, "You old devil," and "You old bastard," and holding out the fruit jar. Sam tried to give me one of those knowing and indulgent smiles out of the side of his eyes, the look that two sober people always have between them for a noisy drunk, but it was pretty weak and strained.

"Sam, old boy, old boy, I want to show you the best damn shotgun in the United States," Lee said noisily, reaching back on the pile of corn to where he'd thrown the gun. It wasn't until that moment that I remembered that he hadn't unloaded it.

"Yeah, that's a right nice gun, Lee," Sam said politely.

"Right nice! I hope to tell you it's a right nice gun. You can't miss with it. Ask old Plug-Ugly here how many shots I missed with it today. Go on, ask him."

"Yeah," Sam said dutifully. "I shore wisht I could git me one like it. It's right smart of a gun."

"Take it outside and feel the balance of it. Take a shot at something. It's loaded. Say, I'll tell you what. Look, you old boar, I'll tell you what. Why don't you go out and locate a covey and try a couple of shots? Gable here'll go with you. I want you to try it out. I'll just stay here and catch a couple of winks while you're gone."

Sam shook his head regretfully. "I wisht I could, Lee. But it's gettin' close to feedin' time."

"Oh, what the hell. It's not late. Go ahead."

"No, but I wisht I could. Mebbe some other time."

Lee's slightly glassy eyes fastened on his face with a hard stare. "What's the matter, you snoop bastard? You afraid to?"

Sam looked at me questioningly and then back to Lee, as though he couldn't make it out. Before I could do anything or say a word, Lee cut loose again.

"Oh, I know what you're up to. You been snoopin' around here the last hour, afraid I might get next to that little bitch. Well, you're not so goddamned smart, mister. She's gettin' plenty of it from somebody, and don't you forget it."

Sam still had the shotgun in his hands. I was afraid to make a sudden move and I knew that any move I made would be too late to do any good anyway. I was watching his eyes and I saw the hot, crazy urgency flooding into them and I could feel the skin on the back of my neck tighten up until it hurt, the way it does when you have a hard chill and it seems like every hair is stabbing you. It was just the way it is when you're skating over deep water when the ice is thin and you hear it start to rumble under you and you try to lift your weight off your feet by sheer will and hold your breath and pray, "Don't let it break. Don't let it break."

He raised the gun slowly and I could hear the ice breaking under all of us, but he was just setting it down in the corner, and he turned his face toward me and the murder was going out of his eyes and there was something hurt in them, a naked and shameful pain that he couldn't hide.

"Sam," I said quietly, and put a hand on his arm. "Come outside a minute."

He nodded dumbly and we went out the small door, leaving Lee cursing behind us. Just before I went out I picked up the gun and took out the two shells and put them in my pocket and took the ones he had in his coat.

"I'm sorry, Sam. I'm sorry as hell," I said as we slowly walked away from the little building, and I was conscious of how futile it was to try to apologize for something like that.

He was silent for a minute and I was afraid he wasn't going to answer. Then he said, "It's all right, Bob. It don't mean nothin'. He's just drunk."

There was still that awful hurt in his eyes and his hands were shaking and I knew he was thinking now of how near he had been to killing a man.

"I'll try to get him away from here. But the best idea is to let him take a few more and he'll pass out."

“He oughtn’t to never drink, Bob.”

“I know.”

“He jest can’t handle it.”

“I know.”

“Something awful is goin’ to happen to that boy someday.” He said it quietly and there was regret in his voice.

“I know it, Sam.” It was the first time I had ever admitted knowing it, even to myself. I looked down at the ground and aimlessly pushed a piece of oak bark around with the toe of my boot.

“You’ll tell him for me, won’t you, that I ain’t goin’ to sell him no more?”

“I’ll tell him.”

“He oughtn’t to have no more, ever. An’ I’d rather he didn’t come back, nohow.”

I didn’t say anything and he stood there for a moment, a little embarrassed, and then he said something about feeding and started off. As I stood there watching him I was thinking that there was a lot of man in Sam. If there hadn’t been I would have had a brother over there in the corn crib with his guts blown all over seventy bushels of corn.

“Oh, Sam!” I called after him. “I know it’s asking a lot, but would you give us a lift out to the highway, where the car is? When he passes out, I mean. I can’t carry him.”

“Well, I’d do it for you, Bob,” he said hesitantly, “but my car ain’t here. One of the Rucker boys carried Mama and the two little girls to town in it. He left his car here, but it’s jest one of them stripdowns. It’ll only take two.”

I went back to the corn crib and Lee was still sitting there where we had left him. He had the dead, vacant stare of the very drunk.

“Well,” he said. “It’s my handsome brother.” He said “hansshm,” so I guessed that’s what he meant. He was back on my beauty again.

“You’ve really played hell this time,” I told him.

“Jeesus, but you’re a homely bastard.”

It’s like being on a merry-go-round, I thought.

“Sam can’t take us out to the car. His car’s not here. All he’s got is some kid’s stripdown.”

“I’ll say she’s stripped down.”

It wasn't any use. We were just going to keep on playing the same records over and over.

"Let's worry about something."

"Go to hell," I said.

I thought about this morning when everything was so bright and fresh and cold and old Mike was holding firm close over the birds, and Lee was Lee and everything was perfect. Oh, hell, I thought.

"Why don't you have a drink?" I asked. If he'd only go on and pass out.

"You want to get me drunk so you can get it."

It's funny, I thought, how they can fix their minds on only one thing.

He took another drink, though. When he put down the jar, which was nearly empty now, it fell over and the rest of the moonshine ran through a crack in the floor. He lay back on the corn after a while and closed his eyes.

"Horses," he muttered.

I sat down and took out a cigarette. "What about horses?"

I don't know whether he heard me or not. He seemed to be asleep, but he muttered stupidly now and then "Sharon liked the horses. Horsh is a noble anim'l."

I sat there moodily smoking the cigarette, being very careful not to start a fire in the corn.

"Poor Sharon. Always hav'n arms twisted. Twists h'r arms."

"Who does? The horse?" Certainly a brilliant conversation, I thought.

"No."

He didn't say anything more and I sat there and watched him for five minutes and he didn't move. It was sooner than I had expected. He usually didn't pass out so quickly. But then, I thought, it hasn't been much over an hour and a half, but he's drunk nearly a quart of the stuff.

I went outside and found Sam.

"He's gone to sleep," I said. "Passed out."

He nodded.

"I'm going out to the highway and get the car. I'll come back and pick him up. "

"That's a long ways," he said thoughtfully.

"Two or three miles."

He didn't say anything else, but walked over toward the corn crib. I went with him, and he opened the door and looked in at Lee, who was sleeping

noisily, with his mouth open. There was something queer about it, but I couldn't quite place it. He hadn't moved.

"I'll drive you out to your car, Bob," Sam offered. "It's too far to walk."

"That's fine, Sam," I said. "I appreciate it."

He pushed the strippdown out of the garage and cranked it. I climbed up with him and we started down the lane. As we went out through the wire gate I saw Angelina come out of the house with a milk bucket.

The car was just a chassis with an old seat cushion thrown on top of the gasoline tank. It was an old Ford, and there weren't any fenders on it or any hood, just the bare essentials. I could see what Sam had meant by not being able to haul a passed-out drunk. It was all we could do to stay on it ourselves.

I don't know why it didn't hit me sooner. Maybe I just wasn't up on my toes mentally, after the experiences of the afternoon. Anyway, it wasn't until we had reached the Buick and Sam had turned around and started back that this awful suspicion began to creep up on me. He had passed out too quickly and too easily.

I cursed the cunning of a drunk with only one thing on his mind. He'd figured that maybe Sam would do just what he had, drive me out to the car and leave him alone there on the place with that girl. Then I knew what it was that had been queer about the way he looked. He'd been lying there with his head over on one side, asleep with his mouth open. And it had been the first time I'd ever seen a drunk sleeping that way without saliva drooling out the corner of his mouth.

The car was doing fifty by the time I shifted out of second and I passed Sam in the old strippdown as if he had a broken axle. I made the sharp, cutback turn off the highway where Sam's road came in with a long screaming slide and a cloud of dust.

As I blasted through the pines up there on the ridge in that narrow pair of ruts I was praying I wouldn't meet anybody. If I did, it would be plain murder. The road was clear all the way.

Just before I hit Sam's place I pressed the horn as hard as I could. As I shot through the gate and slid to a stop in front of the house I got a quick flash of the girl, running to the house from the direction of the corn crib.

I ran past the house without even looking toward her and headed for the crib. As I rounded the corner of it I almost kicked over the bucket of milk

she'd left there right in the path. The damned fool, I thought. The damned, stupid, insane little slut. The door was closed, but I could hear Lee moving around inside and cursing.

"Come back here! Come back!" he was yelling at the top of his voice.

I grabbed up the milk and ran toward the house and burst right into the kitchen. She was there on the other side of the oilcloth-covered table, leaning against it, with her hands gripping the edge, breathing hard and glaring at me.

"Here, you little fool!" I said. "And for Christ's sake pin up that dress or put on another one before Sam sees you. Quick!"

"You go to hell!" she spat at me. Her eyes were hot and smoky and her hair was tangled and there was a long tear right down the front of that tight, sleazy dress, almost to her belly.

I got back to the corn crib just as I heard the Ford pulling up in the lane. Lee had the door open and was weaving around, trying to climb out. I heard Sam stopping in front of the house and I could tell from the way he sounded that he was in a hurry too.

I pushed Lee back inside, not being gentle about it, just shoving him back through the door like a bundle of old rags.

"Where is she? Where is that juicy little bitch? Tell her to come back here!" he kept saying.

I could hear Sam coming around the house, walking fast, and there wasn't anything else to do or any time to lose. I hit him. I slugged him hard on the side of the jaw and he folded up at the base of the pile of corn. I stretched him out the way he had been when we left.

Sam opened the door and looked in.

"Maybe I better help you with him, Bob," he said after a hard look at Lee. Whatever he had been thinking, he was apparently satisfied by the sight of him lying there just as he had been. I felt a little weak.

We carried him out and put him in the car and he never stirred a muscle. I went back and got the guns and whistled for Mike and then just stalled a minute or two. I wasn't afraid Lee would come out of it any time soon.

I wanted to keep Sam out there for a few minutes so he wouldn't get in the house and see that damned girl before she changed her dress and got that wild look out of her eyes. We talked there at the car for several minutes, but I have no idea what we talked about. I didn't hear a word.

I stopped where the road ran close to the little creek just before we got back on the highway and got a little water in my hat and washed Lee's face with it. He didn't come around for five minutes and when he did he was still limp and white. I helped him out of the car and he was sick.

I pulled the birds out of the game pocket of his coat and they were mashed and beginning to smell. There were nine of them and I threw them out on the ground. Mike looked at me questioningly and we both looked at the birds and I felt like hell.

Big thunderheads were piling up in the west when we got out on the highway and the sun was just going down behind them. It looked as if it might rain in the night. Neither of us said anything as I drove home in the dusk.

Seven

It was raining the next morning when I looked out, not a sudden shower with a blue sky behind it, but a slow, leaden drizzle that could go on for days.

It was very early, and Sunday, and no one else was up. I went down to the kitchen and drank a cup of coffee with Rose and then went out to the car. I wanted to go out to the farm today, and I didn't want to get mixed up in any Monday-morning rehash of the game yesterday. Lee had still been limp and very drunk when we got home, and if he and Mary were going to have an argument about it I wanted to stay in the clear.

I ate some breakfast at Gordon's café and drove out to the farm. It lies about seven miles from town, directly across the Black Creek bottom from the Eiler's place, where Sam lives.

I pulled up in front of the house and sat there a minute in the car under the sweet-gum trees, looking at the place. It sat back from the road about a hundred yards, with a sandy driveway going back to it, and the tenant house was across the road on a bare sand hill with a big china-berry tree in the front yard.

The house seemed in better condition than the old house in town. My grandfather had always taken great pride in keeping it up and there had been a renter on the place for three of the four years since he had died. Right now the place looked dead and empty with the dark windows staring vacantly out into the rain and I listened moodily to the sound of water dripping into the barrel at the end of the front porch.

I ran through the rain and up onto the porch, fumbling for the key. The hallway was dark and I walked slowly down it toward the dining room at the rear of the house, hearing my footsteps echo hollowly and thinking of my grandfather and grandmother and of the fun I had had there in my childhood.

The room on the left at the front of the hall was the parlor and there was a fireplace in it, while the room across from it was the bedroom that had been mine during the summers I had lived there. The hall went on back to the dining room, and the kitchen was to the right of that, while on the left of it was the back bedroom, which had another fireplace. I went on to the back bedroom and kindled a fire to take the chill dampness off the place.

My grandparents had died within a few months of each other, my grandmother in April and my grandfather in the following July. He was past seventy-eight, but I had never believed old age had anything to do with his death. They had lived together for more than fifty years and after she was gone he died of loneliness.

He had left me the farm and some eight thousand dollars that was variously invested in savings bonds, timber land, and some lots in town. It had become mine on my twenty-first birthday, just about a year ago. He had left it all to me, I guess, because we had always been so close and I had lived there so long, and because he knew, of course, that the Major had cut me off entirely when I had left home.

My father had fought with the Engineers during World War I and had come home a major, and after that he was always called by his rank. It suited him.

The Major had been a headstrong and violent man as long as he lived, and I guess the one love in his life had been as consuming as his other passions. I had always heard, from the few people who knew him well, but never from the Major himself, that he had been utterly devoted to my mother, who was a frail and gentle girl as completely opposed to him in temperament as it was possible to be. She was considerably younger than he, and when she had died so young—when I was born—it had hurt him far worse than he would ever admit. It had added to his legend of callousness and brutality when he had refused to go into any mourning, but had only gone back to work more profane and hard-driving than ever. It was said he had fired two men for loafing on the job the next day after the funeral, and when they had talked back he threatened to shoot them both if they weren't off his property in five minutes.

He had been a big man with a big voice. He had always worked hard, and he drank harder, and he was a difficult man to work for because of his temper. Lee was the only person I ever knew who could handle him. No

matter what Lee did—and he did plenty—he could always bring the Major round to his side.

Lee had been expelled from college in his junior year for a wild week end in Galveston involving a stolen taxi and a girl from Postoffice Street. Lee always claimed he hadn't stolen the taxi, that it was just that the driver had got even drunker than they were and had wandered off and left them. Anyway, the police had picked up Lee and the girl at dawn on Sunday morning going swimming in the nude out of the cab, which was seventy-five yards out from the beach in a heavy surf. They had driven it out until the motor stalled, at low tide. The Major had paid the damages and got the theft charges quashed and forgave Lee for it, but he never tried to send him back to school. Lee was a junior partner in the firm from then on, a partner whose duties consisted largely of driving a car as fast as it would go over rough country roads. Lee knew how to get along with him, and the Major was always a little proud of him, I think. He wore good clothes with an air, knew how to impress people, and knew a lot of good telephone numbers in a lot of places. The Major was a man who liked parties.

I don't know yet why we couldn't get along together. I had often wondered, during those years, if he didn't subconsciously hate me because my coming into the world had killed my mother. She had died three days afterward, of complications following my birth. I had never really believed this, though, for he was far too smart a man to go in for any such crackpot morbidity. It was more likely that, as Mary had put it once, we both had too much of the same type of pigheaded stubbornness to live together. God knows, some of the whippings he had given me had been terrible to remember, and some of the provocations I had given him had been enough to try the patience of a saint.

A lot of things happened that year, the last one I was at home. Grandmother died in April, Lee came home in May, kicked out of college, and that same month the Major and I came to the parting. I graduated from high school the last of May and began packing to go out to the farm for the summer, as I had every year, and knowing that my grandfather would want me more than ever now that my grandmother was gone.

I will always remember the Major as he was that day. It isn't a fair picture, because he wasn't always that way, but it is one of those things that are ingrained in the memory and never come out. I didn't look any better

than he did that day, either, and I would like to forget it if I could, but I probably never will.

He met me in the living room as I was going out with my suitcase. He had been shaving and had come out of the bathroom in his gray tweed trousers with the suspenders dangling and shaving soap under one ear. His face was dark and I could see the nervous twitching of his right eyelid that always betrayed his anger.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"Out to the farm," I said.

"Take that bag back upstairs and unpack it. You're not going to any farm this summer."

"Why not?"

"Because I say so. No son of mine is going to be a farm hand all his life. That's finished."

"He needs somebody out there."

"He doesn't need you. He's got plenty of help, and if he needs any more he can hire 'em, or I'll hire 'em for him."

I was eighteen then and bigger than he was and I could feel our lifelong argument coming to a head. It was at this point that Lee always pretended to agree with him and turned on the charm and talked him out of it, but I never could do it. At about this time I usually got a whipping or a profane tongue-lashing for my rebellious attitude and the thing ended with my doing what I was told, but today I knew it was finished.

"I'm going out to the farm," I said again.

"God damn you, are you defying me?"

Without answering, I turned and started to go.

"Stop where you are," he roared, and stalked back to the bathroom and returned with the razor strap.

"You've laid that on me for the last time," I said.

"We'll see about that, young man," he said, and swung it viciously. It hit me across the shoulders and hurt, and I caught it and pulled it out of his hand and threw it far down the hall behind me. He drew back as though to hit me with his right hand; his left hand had been amputated during the war.

"Don't hit me," I said. "I'll slug you. You'll need both hands if you ever hit me again." It was something I would regret saying all the rest of my life, but I had said it and he stopped.

His voice wasn't loud now. He sounded as if he would choke, and I could see his big chest rise as though he had to fight to breathe.

"Don't come back. You're finished here."

"I'm not coming back," I said. I picked up the bag and went on down the hall and out the front door. I saw him only once after that, for a little while one afternoon in July, at my grandfather's funeral, but we didn't speak.

I had been home once since then, two years ago, but it was while he was out of town.

When the rain slacked a little I went down to the barn and the mule lot and looked over the buildings and found them in good repair and then crossed the road to the tenant house. It hadn't been used since my grandfather's death, for the man who had been farming the place on the third-and-fourth had lived in the big house, and it had at one time been used for storing hay, but it hadn't deteriorated too badly and could be put back in good condition with a few minor repairs and a half-dozen windowpanes that had been broken.

I was anxious to begin getting the place in shape again. It was mine now, and I intended to build it up to the way it had been when my grandfather was running it. I had always admired the way he had lived. I guess if someone had asked me, I couldn't have explained why I wanted to go on being a farmer. There isn't any money in it, and there certainly isn't any prestige, as there is in being a doctor or a good lawyer or newspaper editor. But I liked the being outdoors all the time, and the hard physical activity, and the changing seasons, and the independence, and the knowledge—when I remembered my grandfather and the men like him—that I was in good company.

* * *

I moved out to the farm the second week in November. I had been pointing toward that ever since I had left New York after that last humiliating fight, and I was glad now to get away from the house in town. Lee was drinking more and more and it was hard to stay there and see what it was doing to Mary and what it was going to do to their marriage, to have to see it and still pretend it wasn't happening.

They came out to see me often in December, sometimes bringing me a roast or something else that Mary or Rose had cooked, for they were convinced I would starve or poison myself with my own cooking. And in a way they were right, for that was the one feature about the arrangement I didn't like. I hated the mess I made trying to cook, and I knew that later on, when the real farming began, I wouldn't have time even to try to cook.

They came out every few days that first month, but after the first of the year their visits became less frequent and sometimes Mary would come alone, in a borrowed car. She never said what Lee was doing, or why he didn't come with her, but I always knew. He wasn't home. Sometimes he would be gone for a week at a time. He had made one halfhearted effort to go to work; he and another man had bought a filling station, but before they'd been operating a month there had been a party in the back room one night after closing and it had burned down. Somebody had left a cigarette lying around, I guess.

One bright, cold day in January she drove out and, not finding me near the house, walked on down through the fields to where I was working in the new ground, cutting and piling logs and downed limbs and burning them.

I was swinging the ax lustily in the thin sunlight of early afternoon. It was cold, only a few degrees above freezing, but I had my shirt off and sweat was glistening on my arms and back. I had forgotten about the soggy and uninspiring cold lunch I had brought from the house this morning and was wrapped up in the acute pleasure I always get out of violent exercise, when I heard an amused voice behind me.

"You look like Thor. And I guess you haven't got any brains at all."

I turned around and Mary was standing by the burning logs, smiling at me.

"Hello," I said. "Where'd you come from?"

She had on a big wrap-around coat and she pulled it closer now, with the collar turned up about her throat, and shivered.

"From town. It's a place where intelligent people live, with heat and comfortable living rooms. It replaced the Stone Age, but I guess you haven't heard about it yet."

I rolled up a short section of log and spread my jacket on it for her to sit on in front of the fire. She stretched her long, silk-clad legs out in front of

her and I notice how out of place they looked here and how the sharp heels of her slippers poked into the damp ground.

“For God’s sake, put on your shirt, you idiot,” she said in exasperation. I slipped into it and squatted down on my heels near her. She opened the paper bag she was carrying and brought out a thermos bottle and some sandwiches and a large piece of cake.

“I brought you some lunch. I wish you’d get married, so I wouldn’t have to keep on feeding you.”

She sent me a sly glance as I bit into a sandwich. “By the way, how is Angelina these days?”

It was a little sudden for me, but I think I was completely deadpan and offhand as I said, “Angelina? Oh, she’s all right, I guess. Why?”

“I just wondered if you were seeing much of her. She lives right across the bottom over there, doesn’t she?”

“That’s right,” I said. “The old Eilers’ place.”

I still couldn’t understand what she was driving at. If she suspected there was something going on between Lee and the Harley girl, she wouldn’t be so happy about it.

“Can she cook?” Mary asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Why?”

“Well, you need a girl who can cook.”

“Is that right?”

“Are you really serious about her, Bob? Have you been holding out on us?”

“No.” I said. “What started all this, anyway?”

“I heard Lee say something about her one time a couple of weeks ago and the next morning I asked him who she was. He said she was the oldest Harley girl and that you were sort of taken with her.”

“Oh,” I said. Well, he wiggled out of it that time, I thought. “He’s exaggerating, Mary. It’s nothing like that. I’ve just been—oh—helping her with her schoolwork.”

“Helping her with her schoolwork? What’s she studying? Blocking? Or off-tackle plays?”

She went on back to the car after a while and I worked hard the rest of the afternoon trying to get a dead hickory chopped in two so I could roll it into the fire. But I kept thinking about Lee. He still had that girl on his

mind, especially when he was drinking. Mary hadn't said he was drunk when he spilled it, but she didn't have to; it was obvious.

Eight

It was around the middle of January that I first met Jake. It was around seven of a cold night, with a mist of fine rain, and I was sitting before the fireplace in the back bedroom, whittling out a handle for a grubbing hoe and feeling a little low and alone, when I heard a car pull up in front of the house. I stopped to listen.

“Hello,” came a shout from the front yard.

I went down the dark hall and looked out. There was an old Ford touring car huddled under the bare trees.

“Come on in,” I called out

We went back into the warmth and light of the bedroom and I got a look at him.

“My name’s Hubbard,” he said, grinning. “Jake Hubbard. Yo’re Mr. Crane, ain’t you?”

I liked the grin. “My name’s Crane,” I said. “But it’s Bob Crane, not Mister.”

He laughed and I shoved a chair toward him for him to sit down. He was about my age, maybe a couple of years older, but smaller, and his movements were fast and decisive and there was an easy assurance about his eyes. He had a big chew of tobacco in his right cheek and now he sat down on the very front edge of the chair like a bird poised for flight, held his hands out toward the fire, and spat a brown stream into the ashes.

He had on new overalls and an old leather jacket, patched at the elbows, and a cap of the type that has ear flaps, and he had the flaps pulled down over his ears now. There was a pleasant homeliness about his face, with its oversized bony nose and the stubble of tough black beard and the long sideburns that came down almost to the bottoms of his ears.

“I hear you goin’ to farm this here place,” he said.

“That’s right.”

“It’s good land. Make a half bale to the acre.”

I nodded, waiting. I thought I knew what was on his mind and was trying to size him up.

"I looked her over a couple times," he went on, rubbing his hands briskly together and holding them out toward the blaze.

"You live around here?" I asked. I had never seen him before,

"Nope. I'm from Gregg County. Jest a-visitin' kinfolks. The Harperses, down the big road about four mile."

I lit a cigarette and waited. He refused one, gesturing smilingly toward the swollen lump in his cheek.

"I'm sorta lookin' around for some land to farm on the halves. Ain't made a crop now in a couple years. Been doin' public work mostly, workin' on the highway over by Mineola, an' some shingle-mill work, but it ain't like havin' a crop somehow. Now, I see you got a good tenant house over acrost the road, leastwise it would be with a little fixin' up an' a few window glasses, an' you got more land than you can work by yourself. I kinda reckoned we might make a dicker." He stopped and looked at me questioningly.

"Sounds all right to me," I said. "I've been looking around for a tenant. You've farmed before, I suppose?"

"All my life except the last couple years. Give me a good pair of mules, ain't air man I ever seen can plow more ground in a day or do it any better."

"I think we could make a deal," I said.

"You got any stock yet? What kind of mules you got?"

I shook my head. "Haven't bought any yet. Haven't had much time to look around, and thought I'd wait until I needed them."

"Fine," he said. "If'n we get together on this, mebbe I can help you pick 'em out. I know mules like I know myself, an' we want good mules with a lot of the old Ned in 'em. None of them old poky bastards that's dead from the ass both ways."

"Sounds like a good idea," I said.

He stood up abruptly. "Well, s'pose I come over tomorrow an' we work it out. I better hightail now before the Old Lady freezes out there."

"Good God," I said. "Is your mother put there? Why didn't you bring her in?"

"Not Ma," he laughed. "My wife. I call her the Old Lady. She was kinda bashful about comin' in, not knowin' you an' all."

“Bring her in, man,” I told him. “I’ll warm up some coffee.”

He went down the hall and I heard him at the front door. “Hey, Old Lady, come on in.” I went out in the kitchen and picked up the coffeepot and brought it back and put it on a bed of coals on the hearth.

She was bigger than he, a robust girl with dark curly hair and happy black eyes that lit up when they rested on him. She had on an old dress of dark woolen material and lisle stockings and a coat with some kind of reddish fur on the collar, the fur looking moth-eaten and a little shabby. You could see she was destined always to be a big woman and someday she would be fat, but that she didn’t much care, for there was about her face the mark of a sweet and unruffled disposition and the serene content of a healthy woman who is well loved and likes it. There was a scrubbed cleanliness about her and her face was pink-flushed with the cold and possibly a little from embarrassment as she stood in the doorway, looking at me and then at him, and when her eyes were on him I envied him. It was that kind of look.

“Honey, this is Mr. Crane,” he said. “We jest about to make a dicker.”

She put out her hand, man-fashion. “I’m proud to know you, Mr. Crane,” she said, smiling a little self-consciously and staying close to Hubbard.

“I’m sorry we left you out there in the cold,” I said.

“It wasn’t nothin’,” she laughed deprecatingly. “I don’t mind the cold much. An’ I hadn’t orta come in. Men don’t want no womenfolks around when they’re a-dickerin’.”

I brought her a chair and she sat down and I poured the coffee.

“Do you live here all by yourself, Mr. Crane?” she asked wonderingly.

“Yeah,” I said. “Incidentally, my name’s Bob. Couldn’t we drop some of the formality?”

She said hers was Helen. He never called her that, though. “He jest calls me Old Lady,” she went on, smiling proudly at Jake.

“Who on earth cooks for you?” she asked then.

“I do my own,” I said. “It’s pretty bad.”

“Why, man,” Jake put in, “you cain’t do that an’ handle a crop too. Man’s got to have vittles ready for him when he comes in at night. He’s too tar’d to be putterin’ around cookin’.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” I said. “But I don’t know of any answer to it. I don’t know what— Wait! Maybe I do.”

“How does this strike you?” I went on. “I turn over half the land to you to work on the halves, with the usual arrangement, with me to furnish the tools and the seed and stock and so on. But instead of you living over there in the tenant house, why don’t all three of us live in this one? It’s big enough. There’s another bedroom up front. Helen could do the cooking for the three of us and I could pay half your grocery bill. That sound O.K. to you?”

They smiled enthusiastically. “Say, that sounds good. An’ the Old Lady can shorely cook, too, you jest wait an’ see.” And then the same idea must have hit them both, for they looked at each other and frowned.

“Well, now, I don’t rightly know,” Jake said. “Sounds like a right smart idea except fer one thing. You see—” He stopped uncertainly.

“What is it?” I couldn’t imagine what had come over them.

“Well, it’s jest that we don’t much cotton to the idea of livin’ with anybody in the same house. Oh, it ain’t nothin’ agin you, Bob. But we had to live with kinfolks the first few months we was married an’ it kinda disheartened us. You understand, it ain’t you, personal?” He looked at me earnestly.

“How long have you been married?” I asked.

“About six months,” Helen said, blushing.

I began to see what was troubling them and went on, “Well, if you want it that way, we can still fix up the house across the road and you can live over there. That is, you can sleep there, and we can use the kitchen and dining room here. How’s that?”

They liked that and we let it stand that way. I found a deck of cards after a while and we played rummy until ten o’clock and Helen made us some more coffee. It was the first good coffee I’d had since I had been out here.

They both came over early the next morning and we went to work on the house across the road. In two days we had it in good condition, and a week later they moved in.

The day after they moved in I bought a secondhand crosscut saw and Jake and I went to work on the new ground in earnest. We worked early and late and when we would come back to the house in the cold dusk with the

bite of frost and the smell of wood smoke in the air Helen would have supper ready for us.

* * *

I saw Angelina in February. I had walked across the bottom with some plow points to see if Sam would shape them up for me in his home blacksmith shop, and found the family butchering a hog. It was a clear day with a cold northwest wind blowing and Sam was cutting up the hog on a table on the south side of the house. Mrs. Harley was helping him, dicing up the flat strips of fat for the lard-rendering kettle. The two little girls, bundled up in heavy coats and with their noses running, were standing around underfoot, and when I came up they backed away and regarded me silently with fright in their brown eyes.

“Howdy, Bob,” Sam said. Mrs. Harley nodded, a little shyly. She was a big woman, but somehow colorless and beaten-looking, and she always seemed to be trying to stand behind somebody or something when she was talking to you.

“You’re just in time for some spareribs. You all could use some over there, couldn’t you?” He had met the Hubbards already; Jake was a fellow fox-hunter.

We talked about the plow points and he said he would do them for me, and when I was ready to go he chopped up the spareribs and said, “Look jest inside the kitchen, Bob. They’s some brown paper to wrap ‘em in.”

I went around the corner and in the back door. Angelina was sitting at the kitchen table cutting a big sheet of newspaper with a pair of scissors. She had on a heavy blue woolen dress with long sleeves, and it was bigger than that thing she’d had on before, and looser, so she didn’t seem about to burst out of it in so many places. But even as loose as it was and as poorly as it fitted, it couldn’t disguise that figure. Her hair was down over her shoulders in two blonde braids, tied at the bottom with little wisps of pink ribbon. She didn’t look quite so much like a sex crime looking for somebody to happen to, but her eyes were still the same. They regarded me sullenly and she didn’t say anything.

“Hello,” I said.

“Hello.”

“Sam said there was some brown paper here.”

“Right there.” She nodded curtly to the end of the table. I walked over and picked it up.

It was warm in there, and the kitchen was clean, the pine boards of the floor gleaming white from long scrubbing, and there was the smell of boiling turnip greens coming from the pot on the cookstove. I could hear the big clock ticking out in the front room and the occasional crackle and pop from the fireplace, and I lingered a moment, glad to be in out of the cold, and feeling again that same unaccountable urge to get her to talk that I had felt before. She always puzzled me. And, too, she was a girl, and when you’re twenty-two and have lived for four months alone there’s something about even one you don’t like. She ignored me and went on working with the scissors.

“What’s that you’re cutting out?” I asked. It couldn’t be some clipping she wanted to save, for she was cutting it diagonally across columns and in every direction. “Aren’t you a little old for paper dolls?”

Her eyes looked up and hated me. “It’s a pattern.”

“Pattern for what?”

“A blouse I’m going to make.”

“What color is it going to be?” Clothes interested me very little, clothes of any kind, and hers not at all, but I wanted strangely to keep the conversation going.

“I don’t know.”

“Did you learn it in school?”

“Learn what in school?” she asked without looking up.

“How to make clothes and things.”

“No.”

I went out and closed the door. There wasn’t any use in trying to talk to her.

Nine

The days are long in April, longer in May, and longer still in June, but they are never long enough. They begin with dew on the grass and the long-legged shadows of sunrise and end with whippoorwills calling in the darkening bottoms and swallows circling and diving at dusk. And all day long, through the hot, sweaty hours, the work goes on.

I lost weight and grew harder as the weeks went by. I was in better condition than I had ever been in college, even with the football and fighting. I took to leaving my shirt off, a few minutes the first day and increasing the time gradually until I was burned black. I liked the work, as I had liked it when I was a boy, and I liked the dog-tiredness, the peaceful feeling of exhaustion at the end of the day that left the mind pleasantly at rest and made the simple act of stretching out on the dark back porch and listening to Jake and Helen talk a sensation of absolute luxury. And after they had gone across the road to the little house I would go down to the well and draw up a tub of cold water, strip down on the short-cropped grass of the mule lot, and splash myself free of the sweat and caked dust out there in the open with just the privacy of the black June night about me. Then I would go back to the house naked except for shoes, which I would kick off when I sat down, and would stretch out on the clean sheet and wonder if I wanted a cigarette badly enough to stay awake to smoke it. Sometimes I would think of Lee and Mary and wonder what Lee was going to do with himself, but it would be a short thought and I would be asleep in the middle of it without ever getting to Angelina. It was a beautiful feeling of exhaustion.

It was down there in the bottom one day in June that I saw Angelina again. I was running the cultivator and when I came out to the end of a row and turned around she was there in the edge of the timber. She had on a long-visored sunbonnet and was carrying a lard pail half filled with

dewberries. She was barelegged and I could see where the briars had scratched her legs, little red tracings in the golden tan of her skin.

I stopped the mules and wiped the sweat off my face.

"Hello," I said.

She looked at me distastefully. I was bareheaded and stripped to the waist, burned black by the sun, and shiny with sweat, and dust was caked on my arms.

"You must think that's fun," she said.

"It is."

"Anybody that'd farm when he didn't have to is crazy. The sun must have cooked your brains. If you ever had any."

"Did anybody ever tell you," I asked, "that what you needed was to have that lovely backside of yours tanned with a razor strap?"

"I guess this is the place for you, all right," she said spitefully. "You ought to be a farmer."

"And a farmer is a type of criminal, as far as you're concerned?"

"No. A type of idiot. I guess Lee was right. Four years in college was just wasted on you." She realized then what she'd said, but it was too late.

I turned around and got out from between the cultivator handles and started toward her. "Who?" I said. "Who did you say? Where've you been seeing Lee?"

She backed away from me. "It's none of your damn business."

"I'll make it my business," I said. "You goddamned little heifer. Lee's married. And he's alive. And he won't be either one if he gets to fooling around with you."

She was like an old she-coon at bay. She backed up against a tall ash and held the lard pail like a weapon, ready to hit me if I came nearer.

"Who said I saw him? Maybe I got a letter from him."

"You got a letter from him, all right. He never wrote a letter in his life."

"Who told you to run my business for me?"

"You little punk," I said. "I ought to slap your ears off."

She gave me a glance full of seething dislike and turned and disappeared down the trail.

* * *

During those months I began to think of Jake Hubbard as a man of whalebone and rawhide. The days were never long enough for Jake, and he highballed from sunup to sundown behind a fast pair of mules and he sang as he worked, and once or twice every week he would go “fox-huntin’” and chase around the countryside all night. He hated slow mules and walked behind the cultivator with a bouncing spring in his step, singing and talking to Big Lou and Ladyfingers with loving blasphemy.

“Haw, dammit, mule. Lou, you big ignorant hunk of muleheaded bastard, one more bobble out’n you an’ I’m gonna skin you alive. Ain’t got no time to waste fiddle-faddlin’ around like this. Grass growin’ in the cotton an’ you draggin’ along like an old sow that’s down in the gitalong.”

It was June and the chopping was all finished and Jake and I were running the cultivators in the long twelve-acre bottom field. The sun was halfway down in the west and as hot as it had been at noon. There was a light breeze blowing, just enough to stir the dust we were raising, and it felt good on our sweat-soaked backs when the little puffs came by. The dry-weather locusts were buzzing in the trees up on the hillside between us and the house. I turned around at the end of a row and stopped just as Jake made the end of the tenth or twelfth row over.

“Let’s get a drink, Jake,” I said.

We wrapped the lines about the cultivator handles and walked down toward the little spring branch that ran down past the end of the field. There was shade here and I felt cool in my wet clothes. We lay down on the sand and drank out of the little stream.

We sat down for a minute in the shade and Jake bit the corner off a plug of Brown’s Mule, wiped his face, and grinned.

“She’s a-comin’ along, Bob. That there cotton’s growin’ nice. An’ it’s good an’ clean.”

“Looks good, doesn’t it?” I said. “Where we’ve swept it up, I mean.”

We were silent for a moment, enjoying the sitting down and the coolness. Once or twice Jake seemed on the verge of speaking, as though there were something he wanted to say but didn’t know how to bring it up.

“Say, Bob,” he said.

“What’s on your mind, Jake?”

“I always been a man fer mindin’ my own business. I mean, I got a long nose, but I ain’t one to stick it in other people’s doin’s.”

“That would seem to describe you, Jake,” I said. “Let’s have it, though. What is it?”

“Well, I thought mebbe I ort to tell you this. It ain’t none of my business an’ you can tell me so an’ I’ll shut up. But it’s about your brother. Lee, his name is, ain’t it?”

“That’s right,” I said.

“Well, I hear he’s quite a stud around the gals. But that ain’t what I’m drivin’ at. I always figger a man ort to get all he can, an’ where he gits it is his own business. Unless,” he looked up at me and his eyes were suddenly serious, “unless he’s a brother of a good friend of yours an’ he’s in a fair way of gittin’ hisself kilt. Then mebbe something ort to be said.”

I lit a cigarette and waited. “All right, Jake. Let’s have it.”

“Well, y’know I was huntin’ last night with Sam an’ the Rucker boys over beyond Sam’s place, an’ ‘long around midnight the Rucker boys started home an’ Sam an’ me come on back this way. Well, I was a little in front of Sam when we hit that little lane that runs from his house out to the big road. It was up there on that sand hill in the pines. They was a little moon last night, you recall, an’ jest as I hit the road I seen a car parked there, with its lights off. I was only about a hundred feet from where it was. Jest then Sam’s dog let out a yip an’ the man in the car must ‘a seen me back there because he stepped on his starter an’ gunned the motor an’ started out down the lane like hell after a man. Sam come a-runnin’ up behind me an’ out into the lane, but by that time the car was out of sight around a turn. Sam didn’t see what kind of car it was, but I seen it plain enough. It was a big roadster, an’ it was a Buick. I can tell all kinds of cars, jest by lookin’ at ‘em. It was that car your brother drives, no mistakin’ it. Sam kept askin’ me if I could tell what kind of car it was, but I told him no, an’ he got kinda quiet an’ didn’t talk much more.”

“Just a minute, Jake,” I said. “Did anybody get out of the car before it started?”

“Well,” he said quietly, “I’ll tell you because I know it won’t go no farther. I don’t like to tattle on gals an’ I don’t like to do ‘em no harm, an’ I wouldn’t say nothin’ now only I think you ort to know. They was a gal in there, all right, an’ she popped outta the car when he stepped on the starter. She lit out like a greased shoat into the trees on the other side of the lane. She was outta sight before Sam got there.”

“How far was this from Sam’s house?”

“Less’n a quarter of a mile. Oh, it was that oldest gal of Sam’s, all right. They ain’t another house within two mile, an’ if it’d been some gal from town he’d brought out there she wouldn’t have got out. Anyway, ain’t nobody else in this here country built like that gal. Good Jesus, jest a-seein’ her scootin’ across the road with her pants in her hand, an’ thinkin’ about it, I was so horny I woke up the Old Lady when I got home.”

“Do you think Sam got home before she got back, and caught her going in?”

“No. Not a chanc’t. I walked real slow the rest of the way, like I was awful tar’d, an’ kept him back. She got in ahead of him, all right. This time.” There was a significant emphasis on the last two words and I knew that Jake had said all he intended to say on the subject and considered his obligation at an end.

I finished the cigarette and threw it away and got up. “Thanks, Jake.”

That night after supper I got in the car and drove in to town. Lee wasn’t at home and Mary said she hadn’t seen him since around noon. I finally found him in the back room of Billy Gordon’s café, the second time I went in there. He and Peewee Hines were shooting craps. He was drinking beer, but he wasn’t drunk.

“Well, if it isn’t the old clodhopper himself.” Lee grinned as I walked in. “Have a bottle of beer. It’s bad for your kidneys.”

“Hi, All-American,” Peewee said and grinned at me. He was in high school about the time Lee was and I never did care a lot for him. He always grinned as if he were watching something through a keyhole. He was a little guy with a fresh way of looking at you.

“Excuse us, Peewee,” I said. “I want to talk to Lee a couple of minutes. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not at all. Go right ahead.” He threw down the dice and sat down at one of the tables, leaned back, and put his feet up.

“It’s private,” I said.

“And this is a public place. Or maybe you own it?”

“Beat it, you little sonofabitch.” I reached for him and he jumped up and made for the door.

Lee looked at me. “You’re going to get yourself killed someday, talking to people that way.”

I sat down. "Well, when I do, it won't be Peewee Hines. And speaking of getting yourself killed, maybe you know what I'm here for."

"I have no idea. Maybe you just came in so I could refresh myself looking at your beautiful face. When I'm shooting craps with people, I don't appreciate having 'em chased off when I'm four bucks in the hole."

"Sam Harley damned near caught you with that Angelina the other night," I said. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"No. Except that you must be nuts. I haven't seen that wench since we were hunting in October."

"That's your story?"

"That's it."

"Lee," I said. "Use your head. Stay away from there. Can't you see he's going to be laying for you now? What do you think he's going to do when he catches you? Write a letter to his Congressman?"

"Look, Bob, I don't know what you're talking about. And if it's what I think it is, you're all wet, and why don't you mind your own business?"

"O.K.," I said. I got up and started for the door. I stopped once and looked back at him sitting there and started to try once more.

"For Christ's sake," he said, picking up the bottle, "why don't you learn to knit?"

Ten

It was the first week in July and we were almost finished laying by the cotton. There was only about two days' work left, plowing out the middles, and then we would be through with it until picking time.

It was a hot night. Jake and Helen had gone across the road to their house at about eight-thirty and I had taken a bath out in the mule lot and gone to bed. But I was restless and had a hard time getting to sleep. The work had been slacking off the past week and I was getting that old feeling of being overtrained and stale and wasn't even comfortably tired when night came. I had been staying too close to the job and away from dances and girls too long, and as long as the work kept up at that grueling pace and I was worn out at night it was all right, but now it was beginning to catch up with me.

I awakened and reached for my watch on the table beside the bed. It was one o'clock. The room was stifling and I was sweating, and I lay there a few minutes savagely restless, hating the waking up and knowing I wouldn't be able to get back to sleep.

I cursed and got up and went out on the back porch, still naked, the way I had been sleeping, and went down to the well. I drew up a bucket of water and had a drink of it and marveled at the coolness of it and then upended the wooden bucket over my head and poured the whole thing over myself. It felt deliciously cold as I stood there in the hot blackness with the short grass springy under my feet. I could hear the mules walking around down by the corn crib and heard one of them kick at something and thud against the planks of the barn. I felt that way myself. I wanted to kick at something.

Back in the house I slipped on a pair of shorts and lit one of the kerosene lamps and sat down at the oilcloth-covered table to try to read, but I couldn't keep my mind on the book. I was just getting ready to blow out the lamp and go out on the porch and smoke a cigarette in the dark when I heard a car coming up the road fast and it turned into the driveway. The

headlights flashed down the hall for a short second as it made the turn. The brakes squealed and the car slid to a stop out in front.

I started to get up when I heard the front door open and somebody was coming down the hall, walking fast. It was Lee. He had on a white linen suit and white shoes and he looked as expensive and patrician as ever except that his face was almost as white as the suit and his eyes were scared.

He stopped in the doorway to the dining room. "God, I'm lucky to find you at home," he said. "I was afraid you'd be gone too."

"You're lucky, all right," I said. "I just got back from the Mediterranean in my yacht. Where the hell did you think I'd be?"

"All right, all right. But this is no time for wisecracks, Bob." He wouldn't sit down and he couldn't stand still. He was walking jerkily back and forth and stopping to lean on the doorframe and then he'd move again. He lit a cigarette and then after one drag or two on it he went around me and threw it out the back door. His face was greasy with sweat.

"You got any money around here? I need a little, and I need it bad. And fast."

"What's the gag? Don't tell me you've already gone through all the dough the Major left?"

He gestured impatiently. "Oh, I've got money. I'll pay you back. But I can't get into the bank until nine. And I'm flat broke and I've got to get out of here fast. I need dough for gasoline. You've ten or twenty, haven't you?"

I went into the bedroom and fished in a suit and found my billfold. I came back and handed him a twenty and a five, all I had in the house. He shoved it into his pocket nervously. I could see that fear still crawling in his eyes but his nervous pacing subsided a little when he had the money in his pocket. He muttered a short thanks and turned as if in a hurry to get started. Then he hesitated again and turned back.

"How bad is it?" I asked. I sat down at the table again and lit a cigarette.

"Sam Harley's after me."

The match burned my fingers. "He finally caught you?"

"Caught me? I hope to hell he caught me. It was awful." He was shaking and he came over and sat down across from me under the light of the kerosene lamp and drummed on the table with his fingers. I thought of the old saying that animals could smell fear, and wondered how he would smell to one of them right now.

He just had to talk. I didn't want to ask him about it because I didn't want him to waste any time. With Sam Harley after him he wasn't in any position to be dawdling around with small talk, because he was in a bad spot and it was getting worse with every minute. It was something I had been trying to tell him for a long time but he had to find it out for himself and now he was doing it the hard way.

But he had to get it out of his system. I knew it had been bad, from the way he had to talk. "Now, for God's sake, don't preach to me, Bob. I'll admit I've been getting to that Angelina and you warned me about it, but dammit, don't preach to me." I hadn't said a word.

"He almost caught me once before. Or somebody did. But I got away with it. Only I didn't have sense enough to stay away. I can't. Christ, if I only could. I tell you, that girl's a witch."

"Or anyway, something that sounds almost like it," I said.

"He got wise, all right. Because he was laying for me this time. But I had the car parked farther up from the house, and we weren't in it. I took a blanket out there with me and we had it spread out in a pine thicket fifteen or twenty yards from the car. Because she enjoys it. Jesus, how she enjoys it! She'll almost beat you to death in the seat of a car. So I brought this blanket. She'd been getting word to me the nights he was going foxhunting and she was sneaking out. She has a room of her own and her mother is a sound sleeper. Only this time I guess he wasn't going hunting, or else he sneaked back and found she was gone. Anyway, he was looking for us, and I guess he found the car. But he never would have found us if that damned girl didn't make so much noise. You'd think she was being killed."

"Look," I said, "I've been living out here alone for a long time, and I mean alone, so would you mind leaving out some of the stuff about how much she likes it and how much noise she makes?"

He didn't even hear me. He was trying to light a cigarette but his hands were shaking so much he couldn't strike the paper matches.

"Hold it over the lamp chimney," I said. I had to light it for him. He went on, talking jerkily. "The first thing I knew about it was just after we'd got quiet and all of a sudden I heard a footstep in the dark behind us and a gun cocking and he said, 'Get up from there, Crane. I don't want to kill her too.' Oh, Jesus, sweet Jesus.

“I rolled and got up running and he shot twice but it was awful dark in there in the pines and he missed both times. I heard one of ‘em hit a tree and glance off and whine and I ran that much harder. I hit a tree and took a lot of skin off my hip and I fell down once, but I made it to the car, I’ll never know how. I was lucky I’d left the keys in it instead of in my pants because I was naked except for a shirt. My clothes were back there on the blanket. If he found the car first I’ll never know why he didn’t take the keys himself. If he had, he’d have got me. I guess he didn’t think of it. Anyway, I got it in gear and stepped on the starter and the gas all at the same time, without even shutting the door. I must have thrown sand for a hundred yards, getting started. He shot once more and it went through the back of the top and blew a hole in the windshield. I wouldn’t drive that road again at night at that speed for a thousand dollars.

“I drove home with just the shirt on and sneaked in a window and got these clothes on and packed a bag and then remembered all my money was there in my other pants. I found Mary’s purse without waking her up, but she only had two dollars in it. I drove over to Billy Gordon’s house and a couple of other places but I couldn’t find anybody home and I couldn’t get away without some money. So I came out here. And just as I was coming through the square, headed this way, I saw Sam’s car coming into town. He didn’t see me.”

“He’ll be here. You better get going.”

I couldn’t figure him out. He was scared to death and he knew Harley was going to kill him if he caught up with him and he knew that the only thing that would save him was distance, and still he couldn’t get started. He seemed to want to stay and talk about it.

“I thought I’d go to Dallas this morning and then as soon as I can get some money through from the bank I’ll go on to California or somewhere for a while.”

“For a while?” I asked. “For good, you mean. If you come back here five years from now, Sam will kill you.”

“You’re kidding. He’ll forget it in a while.”

I shook my head. “I know. I was kidding before, too, wasn’t I? When I said you were going to get in a hell of a mess if you didn’t leave that alone.”

“You think he’ll remember it that long?”

“Listen,” I said, “you’re washed up here. You can’t ever come back, as long as Harley’s alive. And I guess you’re finished with Mary, too. How are you going to explain it to her?”

“I don’t know, Maybe I can think of something.”

“Well, you’d better get going,” I said. “Sam will be here as soon as he tries in town.”

Then we both heard it. It was a car coming down the road, and from the way it sounded it was going as fast as they’ll run.

It turned into the driveway. The lights flashed down the hallway, dim at first, and then very bright as it went into low in the sand. I could see Lee’s face in the flash of it and it wasn’t a pretty sight. A man that sick with fear isn’t something you want to look at.

“Duck out the back way,” I said, grabbing him by the arm. “He’ll come in here and I’ll try to stall him long enough for you to get back around to the car. You got the keys?”

He nodded and patted his trousers pocket. He couldn’t talk. Going on out the back door, he disappeared into the darkness and I sat there at the table facing the hall, thinking for a second of what a putrid joke it was to be wearing a white linen suit when you’re playing hide-and-seek in the dark with a man after you with a gun.

I heard the door of the Buick slam and knew Sam was in there after those keys. He’d missed the boat once tonight by forgetting about them. Thank God, Lee had them with him. And then I heard something else. It was unmistakable. It was the sound you hear in the filling station when the man raises the hood of your car to check the oil. The Buick wasn’t going anywhere for a while now when Sam finished with the ignition wiring. I heard the front screen door open and then his slow steps in the hall. He stopped in the doorway to the dining room and looked at me carefully. Then he thought better of it and came all the way in and stepped to one side and put his back up against the wall.

“Howdy, Bob,” he said quietly.

“Hello, Sam,” I said.

He had on overalls tucked into those big laced boots and no shirt and was wearing a faded blue denim jumper that was tight across his big shoulders and wet with sweat under the armpits and I could see the tangled mat of black hair on his chest above the overall bib, where the jumper was

open. In the right-hand pocket of the jumper was the big bulge of a gun, and I knew it was a .38 or .45 from the size of it. There was shiny sweat on his face, and his eyes were like wet black marble in the lamplight. There was a two or three days' growth of black stubble on his face, and now as he passed his hand across his mouth to wipe off the sweat I could hear the rasp of it against the calloused hardness of his palm in the silence.

"Where is he, Bob?" He didn't raise his voice. He might have been asking a stranger how to find the men's room.

"Where's who?" I asked, not liking it and wondering how he was going to take the stalling. I wasn't the one he was after, but there was no telling just how much of that simple-minded repartee he could handle, the way he was feeling now and with that gun in his pocket.

"I don't want no trouble with you, Bob. We always got along all right I want your brother an' I know he's here. Jest for his sake, in case he's listenin', he won't move that car out there right away. I fixed that."

I guess I already had my mind made up before he finished talking. Maybe even before he came in. There wasn't any other way. He'd get Lee sooner or later; he was that kind of man. And there was a damned good chance he'd get him tonight. And there was Mary, and what it would do to her. There wasn't any other way, but I didn't feel heroic about it. I felt like a damned fool.

"Lee's not here," I said. "He went to Dallas a week ago." I still didn't like it, and the hair on the back of my neck was sticking into me like goose flesh when you have a hard chill. I knew how he was feeling, and when you get like that you're not in very good condition for cold, rational thought. And what I had to tell him was worrying me. That was the bad part of it. There was no way of knowing whether he was going to be in any mood for a horse trade and I didn't know how fast his mind worked. He might even believe me and shoot before he got the thing worked out in his mind.

"Bob, I don't want no trouble with you if I can help it. Ain't no use you lyin'. His car's right out there in front."

This was where I had to tell him. "Oh, the car," I said. "He left it with me because I'm having mine overhauled. Brake bands are worn out. I've been using it."

I wondered how soon he would begin to catch on.

“That’s a goddamn lie!” He got that far with it and then I could see it start to soak in. He was getting it.

He’s getting it, I thought. Brother, you’re the one who’s getting it.

Eleven

He stood there for a minute before he said anything and seemed to be trying to make up his mind. The silence in the room was beginning to get me. I can stand these things better when there's more noise.

"You was usin' that car tonight?" He wanted to be sure we had it all straight.

I could see then that the thing was going to grow into a beautiful understanding between us.

"Why, yes, I was using it," I said. "I hope you didn't wreck it too badly, Sam."

"No," he said slowly. "I guess we can fix it up all right. Why? Was you figgerin' on usin' it today? Goin' somewhere, maybe?"

"Well," I said, "I was thinking of a little trip. To Shreveport, maybe. You see, Sam, Angelina and I have decided we don't want to wait any longer. That is," I went on quickly, "with your approval, Sam. I hope we have your permission."

"Why, shore, Bob." His face began to relax a little. "And jest to think, I didn't even know you two was a-courtin'."

Careful now, Sam, you great big understanding son-of-a-bitch, I thought. Let's don't make this too great a surprise and spoil all this beautiful act. Surely you remember me, the old faithful suitor of the fair Angelina?

"Well, sit down, Sam," I said. "I've got a bottle around here somewhere and I think we ought to celebrate."

He came over and sat down at the table but I noticed he still was careful not to have his back toward an open door or window. I found the bottle and brought out some glasses.

"Here's to the two of you, Bob," he said, raising his glass.

I told him to have another and got out my safety razor and brought a pan of water and propped a mirror up on the table. I shifted the lamp around so I could see, and shaved. My face looked funny with the lather on it. I was

burned black with the months in the sun and my hair was bleached the color of cotton.

I wondered where Lee was. Under the porch? Or down in the barn? He probably had heard Sam going into the ignition wiring of the car and knew there wasn't any use in going around there.

I packed a bag and got a gray flannel suit out of the clothes closet and shined my shoes. Sam and I talked about the crops and the weather and the large number of quail that had hatched out around his place.

We went out front together and it was beginning to grow light in the east with a strip of pink above the ridges the other side of Black Creek bottom. It was a cloudless morning with no breeze, and I knew it was going to be a scorching day. We haywired back the ignition wiring Sam had torn out of the Buick.

I had an idea that after we got the wiring back Sam wouldn't leave the car, and he didn't. He knew Lee was still around somewhere and he wasn't taking any chances. I guess he was afraid we'd both get the jump on him and light out together. He sat in the car and I went back in the house, saying I had to get my bag and the car keys.

I ducked out back and went down to the barn on the run. I was pretty sure Lee would head in that direction when it became too light for him to hide out around the house.

He was up in the loft, sitting in the hay and smoking a cigarette.

"For God's sake, throw that cigarette out," I said. "Do you want to burn the barn down with the mules in here?"

He sullenly pitched it out the door. "Where is he?"

"Out front in the car. Give me the keys."

"Where you going?"

"To a wedding," I said.

He looked down at his feet. "I'm sorry, Bob."

"You're sorry?" I said. "Give me the keys."

He fished them out and handed them over. "How'm I going to get back to town?"

"I don't give a God damn how you get back to town. You can walk if you want to. Or use my car. It's in the tool shed."

"Why don't you go in yours and leave the Buick here?"

“And tell Sam it drove itself out here? He knows you’re here, all right, but do you want to slap him in the face with it while he’s carrying that gun?”

“All right”

“And don’t forget I’m going to a wedding. Nothing but the best for the young bride. She’ll probably feel more a’ home in the Buick.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re making me cry,” I said. I went down the ladder and he looked after me, not saying anything.

When I got back out front Jake and Helen were coming across the road from the little house to start breakfast. When they came up everybody said, “Good mawnin’” all around and looked embarrassed and I could see the concern in their eyes. They knew something serious had happened and Jake was pretty sure what it was.

“Jake,” I said, “I’ll be gone for a few days. If you’ll finish plowing out those middles I’ll make it right with you for my half when I get back.”

“Oh, that’s all right, Bob,” he said reassuringly. “Ain’t but about three days’ work for one man.”

They went on into the house, turning when they went through the door to look curiously back at us. Helen’s eyes were troubled and I knew she was worried that I’d got into some kind of jam.

“Well, let’s get started,” I said. Sam got out of the roadster.

“I’ll go ahead, Bob. An’ you follow me in the Buick.”

“Like hell I’ll follow you. I’ve told you I was going over there and that’ll have to be good enough for you.” I was a little sick of being shoved around. And I’d be damned if I was going in there after that girl with Papa at my heels with the gun.

“I’ll be there when you get there,” I went on, getting into the car. I got it into gear and shot out onto the road, looking at the bullet hole in the windshield and not finding it very comforting.

I gunned it all the way, raging inside and getting some relief from the fast driving and the powerful smoothness of the big car. And I wanted to have it out with that damned girl before Sam arrived. There was no telling what the little fool would do or say.

The sun was just clearing the tops of the pines when I drove in through the gate into the clearing. The front door of the house was open and smoke

was coming out of the stovepipe from the kitchen. There was the clear, hot smell of a summer morning and I wished I were going out to work in the fields or going fishing with Jake, the way we had planned it, when the work was done.

I went up on the front porch and knocked and then went on in. Mrs. Harley and the two little girls were eating breakfast. There was no sign of Angelina. They looked up at me apprehensively as I walked in and suddenly I felt sorry for them. The little girls were so obviously scared with all this mysterious business of Papa going off somewhere mad in the middle of the night, and this big man they didn't know coming in like this. Their big brown eyes regarded me fearfully and they forgot to eat.

"Good morning, Mrs. Harley," I said.

"Howdy, Mr. Crane," she replied timidly, and you could see what it had been like with her all night. The last four or five hours must have been hell for her. I wondered what it was like to be a woman and know your man was gone to commit a murder that would probably land him in the pen for the rest of his life and know that you were going to live the rest of yours with the disgrace and the shamed daughter and the children without a father to support them.

"Sam will be along in a minute," I said.

"Is he—I mean, did he—" She couldn't get it out.

"Everything is all right," I said. "There wasn't any trouble."

I could see the relief go through her in a big swell and there were tears in her eyes.

"Maybe you would like to have a bite with us, Mr. Crane?"

"Thanks," I said. "I'm not very hungry, but I'd sure like a cup of that coffee in a minute. But could I see Angelina for a second first?"

"Why, yes, she's in her room. It's the front one, on the right as you come in."

I knocked on the door. "Who is it?" Angelina called out.

"Bob Crane."

"What do you want?"

"Never mind. I want to come in. Are you dressed?"

"Yes. But I don't want to talk to you."

I went in and closed the door so they wouldn't hear me in the kitchen. She was sitting on her bed in a white bathrobe and looked at me sullenly.

“Get dressed,” I said. “And start packing your stuff.”

“Why?”

“We’re going to Shreveport this morning. This is our happy wedding day.”

“You think I’m going to marry you?” she spat at me.

“Yes. Now put your clothes on and shut up.”

“Why, I wouldn’t marry you if—if— Get out of here!”

I sat down on a big trunk and lit a cigarette and looked at her. She was pretty, all right, with the blonde hair mussed up and her brown eyes shooting fire at me.

Her room was nicely fixed up, with fluffy white-and-green curtains across the windows and handmade rag rugs on the floor. There were pictures cut from magazines on the walls, and from somewhere she had picked up printed copies of three of Frederic Remington’s pictures. They had been stuck on the wall with frames of brown paper.

I took a drag on the cigarette and threw the ashes on one of the rugs.

“Now get this through your fat head once and for all,” I told her. “You started this thing and now we’re going to finish it in the only way that’s left. I don’t give a God damn what you think or want or anything else. I don’t know what goes on in that so-called mind of yours, but I’d think that you would understand after the shape Sam caught you in last night that your position is pretty thin around here. He may beat you to death or throw you out yet. Not that I give a damn what he does to you, but there are some innocent people that are going to get hurt if Sam isn’t pacified pretty shortly.”

“What have you got to do with it?” she asked, giving me a surly look.

“Never mind. Sam’ll be here in about ten minutes. You’d better be packing when he shows up. I don’t think this thing has sunk into your skull yet; you don’t seem to realize what kind of spot you and Lee are in. Sam catches you out there in the bushes flat on your calloused back and you think he’s going to write a letter to the *Times* about it? Get wise to yourself. We get married today or Sam is going to kill Lee. And don’t fool yourself that the sheriff or a peace bond or something else is going to stop him.”

“If he thinks it was you, why would he shoot Lee?”

“He doesn’t think it was me. He knows who it was. But I’m not married, and he’d rather have a bridegroom than a corpse.”

She hitched around on the bed until her back was toward me and she was looking out the window. "All right," she said bitterly. "I'll do it. But, I wouldn't live with you if you paid me."

"Write me about it sometime," I said. I went out and closed the door.

The children were gone outside but Mrs. Harley was still sitting at the table. She poured me a cup of coffee.

"Mrs. Harley," I said, "I don't know exactly how to go about telling you this, but Angelina and I are going to Shreveport this morning to be married."

"Yes, I kinda guessed that was it." She flushed and looked away, and I felt uncomfortable.

It took a long time for her to get it out and she started several times only to break down in confusion, but finally she said it.

"I know it wasn't you. I mean, last night, Sam said—"

I didn't say anything. There didn't seem to be any answer to that. There wasn't any use in lying to her, for she knew the whole thing, and there wasn't anything to be gained by confirming the fact that her daughter had been lying with a married man.

She started to cry then, with her face buried in the crook of her arm on the table, and I felt worse than ever. There was such a beaten hopelessness about her grief that you knew there wasn't anything you could do for her.

After a while she stopped and said quietly, "It ain't all like you think, Mr. Crane. It ain't all her fault or your brother's fault. She hasn't had—Well, Sam has always been so strict with her, and she ain't never had no fun like other girls. He was so stern with her."

I heard Sam driving up in front then, and Angelina came out of her room with a small imitation-leather handbag. She was wearing a poorly made cheap dress and lisle stockings and her shoes were half-soled and clumsily repaired. Her clothes were a mess, but they couldn't completely cover up what she really looked like.

She didn't even say good-by to her mother and only stared coldly at Sam as we went out the front door. Sam shook my hand with embarrassment and Mrs. Harley tried to say something and then her face broke up and she turned and ran back into the room and I could hear the heavy weight of her fall onto the bed and the muffled crying into the blankets.

Twelve

She sat in silence way over on her side of the seat, staring straight ahead and ignoring me. It wasn't until we were almost in town that she spoke.

"Where are you going to drop me off?"

"Drop you off?" I asked. "Where'd you get that idea?"

"You're not really going to go through with it, are you?"

"Of course we are."

"Why? I didn't think you liked me."

I lit a cigarette. "I don't."

"Then why, for God's sake?"

"I thought we went over all of that a while ago."

"But if it was just on account of Lee, he's had a chance to get away by now. And if Papa's fool enough to let us go off alone—"

"It was a horse trade and he kept his end of it, and I'm not going to double-cross him. Maybe you don't know what you're fooling with, but I do."

She sniffed. I started to go on and tell her the rest of it and then I thought, Oh, what the hell? Why try to get anything through her thick skull? Why try to explain to her that it didn't make any difference if Lee did get away this morning? He still had to live in this country and he'd never be able to do it with Sam Harley after him. And neither would I if I crossed him up now. And why try to get it through her head how important it was that Mary didn't find out about it?

We drove up South Street in silence and I stopped the car in the alley behind the bank and got out.

"I've got to cash a check," I said. "It'll be a half hour or more before the bank opens. Do you want to buy anything or have some breakfast or something?"

"No," she said curtly. "I don't want anything."

"Suit yourself," I said.

When the bank opened I went in and wrote a check for three hundred dollars. Julian Creed raised his prim eyebrows at the amount. "What are you doing, Bob? Buying more mules?" he asked in his high-pitched voice.

"You might call it that," I said.

I went back out in the alley. It was getting hot already, and I took off the flannel coat and pitched it across the shelf behind the seat and got in.

"We're off," I said. "How's the panting bride?"

Her eyes were smoldering. "To hell with you."

When we came to a stop at the mouth of the alley I saw Mary and another girl walking along the other side of the street. She was in fresh white linen and had on white shoes and she was going the other way and hadn't seen us, walking slowly along with that long-legged grace it was so delightful to watch. She waved at someone across the street I couldn't see and I slammed into low and rubber burned as we shot out of the alley and swung east.

"You drive like you was crazy," Angelina said.

When I didn't say anything, she went on, "Who was that girl?"

"Was there a girl?" I asked. "Where?"

"The one you were looking at. The redheaded girl in white. You must know her, you stared at her hard enough."

"You mean you don't know her?"

"Well, I wouldn't have asked you if I did."

"You should get acquainted. You've been doing enough of her work. That was Mrs. Leland Crane."

"Oh," she said and was silent for a minute. Then, "I don't think she's so pretty. Do you?"

"Am I supposed to?"

"I don't give a damn what you do. I just asked you a question."

"Ask me another one. We'll make a game out of it. Go on, ask me the capital of Omaha."

"Oh, go to hell."

"Don't we want to be a well-rounded girl? Or do you think just your heels are enough?"

She glared at me and didn't say anything. I shut up then and we drove for an hour in complete silence. I pushed the car hard and kept my eyes on the road and she sat rigidly on her side of the seat with her hands in her lap

and stared straight ahead. I kept expecting her to cry, but she never did, and I began to be conscious of a grudging respect for her. She was taking a lot, for an eighteen-year-old, and she was taking it standing up and fighting back, with no tears and no hysterics. This thing wasn't any more fun for her than it was for me, and I hadn't made it any easier for her the way I'd been riding her. I began to be ashamed of the way I had been acting, the way I had been wanting to take a swing at something or somebody and had been taking it out on her because she was here within reach. I'd been blaming her for the whole stinking mess just because I didn't like her, and if anybody was to be blamed for it, it was Lee, and I knew it.

"I'm sorry about being nasty," I said after a while.

"What? You mean you're not nasty all the time?" she asked scornfully.

Now, hold onto yourself, I thought. Don't let her get your goat again. Maybe she is scared and all this hard-shelled antagonism is a defense. Maybe it's just what she does instead of crying, the way another girl would.

"Not all the time. There are moments when I'm almost human."

"Nobody would ever know it from looking at you. You're too big and ugly to be human."

"You certainly are a gracious little punk," I said, beginning to forget some of my noble compassion. "What you need is a good whipping."

"You lay a hand on me, you big ape, and I'll kick you where you won't forget it in a hurry."

"Well, well, the little expert on male anatomy. Is that what they're teaching the girls in the tenth grade now?"

"I wonder how anybody like Lee could have a brother like you. I just don't believe you're any kin, as homely and as mean as you are."

What's the use? I thought. Trying to be civil is a waste of time.

We rolled into Shreveport a little before noon and I parked the car and hunted up a doctor to get the medical certificate. Then we went up and got the license and by that time it was twelve o'clock and the justice of the peace was out to lunch. We came out of the building and stood there on the sidewalk in the hot sun for a moment, undecided where to kill an hour. We started walking slowly along the street, headed for a drugstore for a sandwich and something to drink.

We were passing a big department store, going slowly and aimlessly and looking in the windows. She stopped for a moment in front of a window

display of women's dresses. I stopped and waited for her, lighting a cigarette, and watched the traffic going by in the street. She started ahead again, and looked back over her shoulder at the window full of clothes, and just for a second I saw her eyes without that defensive sullenness in them. They were hungry, and hopeless, and there was heartbreak in the way she looked back and then went slowly on.

She waited dully for me to come on. I looked at the clothes she had on, probably actually seeing them for the first time since she had come out of her room this morning, and all at once acutely aware of the dowdy shapelessness of the cheap dress and the crude way the cracked shoes were repaired.

"Wait a minute," I said. "What were you looking at?"

"Nothing," she said. "Let's go."

There were four dummies in the window dressed in different dresses and one was displaying a brown linen skirt and a little jacket and carrying a price tag of \$35.

"Was that it?" I asked.

"Well, I was just looking at it."

"Do you like it?"

"What difference does it make?"

I took her by the arm and started toward the door. It was dim inside after the glare of the sun and it smelled of new cloth and floor-sweeping compound. A gray-haired saleswoman came toward us smilingly behind one of the glass counters.

"Could I help you?"

"Yes," I said. "My wife would like to look at that brown linen thing you have in the window."

"Certainly," she said, giving Angelina a quick glance, "I believe we have it in just her size." I could see the sharp feminine appraisal in the gray eyes and the half-concealed envy of that terrific figure. "Right this way. Please." She started back toward the rear of the store.

Angelina's face was hot. I guess the only thing she had seen in the clerk's scrutiny was contempt for the clothes she had on.

"I can't buy that," she whispered, embarrassed and angry. "I've only got about seven dollars."

I pulled out five twenties and stuffed them into her handbag and gave it back to her.

“Now you’ve got a hundred and seven. I think you can just about get what you need worst with that. And, for God’s sake, when you come to stockings get some nylons and the best ones they have. It should be a crime for a girl with legs like yours to wear the stockings you’ve got on.”

She flushed again. “I didn’t think you liked anything about me.”

“Well, let’s don’t go into it. Just put me down as a patron of the arts. I love beauty.”

I started for the door. “I’ll be back in about a half or three quarters of an hour. You’d better run along. The clerk’s waiting for you.”

She looked after me with her eyes bewildered and confused and then she tried to smile but it didn’t quite come off and she turned and went rapidly down the aisle.

I suddenly remembered when I was back out in the street again that I was trying to be married without a ring and stopped and bought one. Then I took the bags around to the hotel and registered. It looked strange on the card: Mr. And Mrs. Robert E. Crane. When I got up in the room I gave the bellboy some money and told him to hunt up a bottle and he was back with one in less than five minutes.

I poured a big drink and sat down in an armchair by the window and looked out into the sun-blasted street and thought sourly of what a sap I was. Why did I have to give that surly little brat a hundred dollars? That was more money than I’d spent in the past four months. Sugar daddy from the cotton country, I thought, taking a big drink and shuddering at the fiery taste of it. But all the time I was calling myself a thickheaded idiot I kept seeing again that beaten look there had been in her eyes as she turned away from those things beyond the plate glass.

What the hell, I thought defensively, a girl is entitled to get something out of a wedding. Even if she is a mule-headed little punk who doesn’t know the meaning of civility, and even if the wedding is by courtesy of the Winchester Repeating Arms Company, she should have something out of it she can remember without wanting to cut her throat. That’s right, let’s have a good cry. Let’s build her up. You know what always happens whenever you start feeling sorry for Angelina. Angelina, the young bride. Nuts! I

poured the rest of the drink in the basin in the bathroom and went back to the store.

She and the saleswoman were still hard at it and the packages and opened boxes were scattered over the counter. Angelina's back was turned toward me and she didn't see me coming, but the clerk smiled and she turned around and it was an Angelina I'd never seen before who looked at me. She still had on the same clothes and nothing was changed except her eyes, but they were altogether different. I guess it wasn't anything, really, except that they were happy, and I had never seen that expression in them before.

She smiled a little hesitantly and said, "Do you like these—Bob?" It was the first time she'd ever called me by name. She was holding up a pair of very sheer nylons, holding them as caressingly as a mother might a baby.

"They're very nice," I said, trying to overcome the traditional male indifference toward any stocking that doesn't have anything in it.

"And look at the shoes I got." She rummaged around in the pile of merchandise and came up with a pair of slender-heeled white shoes with practically no soles to them. Each time she would dredge up something else out of the confusion of stuff she would look happily at me for some approving comment and then before I could think of something to say she would be off after another item.

When they were all wrapped up and we were ready to go, I told the clerk to have them delivered to the hotel. Angelina's face fell slightly. "Can't we carry them, Bob?" she asked hopefully. "They're not very heavy."

"O.K.," I said, and we gathered them up. We went out and when we were in the street and headed for the hotel she looked up at me over the bundles she was carrying, the ones she wouldn't trust out of her own arms, and said, simply, "Thank you. I don't know why you did it, but it was the nicest thing anybody has ever done for me since I was born."

"You're welcome, Angelina," I said uncomfortably. Her eyes were beautiful, I thought, when she wasn't using them as weapons.

Thirteen

We went up to the room so she could change into her new things before the ceremony. As soon as we were inside she threw the bundles on the bed and began unwrapping them excitedly.

She held up a slip and admired it and turned to me. "I can't get over it, Bob. But I'll never know why you did it."

"I'm not very bright," I said. "I was kicked on the head too much playing football."

"I don't think you're as mean as you pretend to be."

"I'm just a campfire girl at heart," I said absently, pouring another drink and pushing some of the stuff off one end of the bed so I could lie down across it. I lay there glumly, propped on one elbow, sipping the whisky and water and watching her. Nobody will ever understand them, I thought. They're in a class by themselves. You get one catalogued and classified and tagged and before you can tie the tag on she's changed into something else. The sullen little brat who was in a jam from rolling back on her round heels once too often and getting caught is now the starry-eyed young girl going to her first prom and trying to decide which of her new dresses to wear. She didn't look angry or defiant now. I tried to analyze just how she did look and watched her curiously. She was eager, and happy, and her eyes shone as she unwrapped her parcels, and I wondered if she had forgotten what we were here for.

She ran into the bathroom and turned on the water in the tub. "Oh, it's such a beautiful bathroom," she said eagerly. "Do you think I have time for a bath?"

"Sure," I said. I went to the phone and ordered some soda and ice and when it came up I mixed a good drink.

It was hot, even with the overhead fan running. I took off my coat and swished the ice around in the glass. I could hear Angelina splashing around in the bathroom and wondered sourly what was keeping her so long. I

cursed the heat and the waiting and Shreveport. And then I cursed Angelina and Sam Harley and Lee and then the heat again.

What do you suppose is keeping the young bride? Let's get the hell out of here and get this thing over with so I can get going. Get going to New Orleans or somewhere. This is going to be a good one. I'd been living out there a long time alone, too long when you're twenty-two, with that ache you get, and those dreams. Living in the country and farming is fun, but you have to take time off to relax. And you have to have the ashes hauled once in a while or you'll go crazy. You're overtrained. You get sour. You get so you want to fight everybody. No, not everybody, you phony bastard. You didn't want to fight Sam Harley, did you? Not while he was carrying that gun. It didn't take any six or seven men to hold you back then, did it? Now, don't start that. You didn't get into this stinking mess because you were afraid of Sam Harley. You got into it because you didn't want Mary to find out about Lee and this Angelina and because you didn't want Lee to find out what it's like to be shot full of .38-caliber holes. At least, it sounds better that way. And a lot of good it'll do. What about the next one? And the one after that? Are you going to marry them all? Lee is your brother and you love him and he's a wonderful guy, but he's not a husband. He's a stallion.

I thought some more about New Orleans. It was going to take one hell of a good binge to get the taste of this business out of my mouth. Oh, well, I thought, I've got that money I've hardly even touched, and the time, and nothing stopping me. Except a wife, of course. Don't forget the young bride.

I heard a padding of bare feet behind me. The young bride was out of the tub.

A voice said happily, "Well, aren't you going to turn around? I want to show you the rest of my new clothes."

I turned around and she was standing near where my feet extended over the side of the bed. I dropped the cigarette I had in my hand and it fell on the bedspread and started to burn it and I picked it up and ground out the coal between my fingers without feeling it.

I saw the rest of her new clothes, which weren't extensive. She had on a pair of very brief pants and a thin robe of some sort and her hair was down

around her shoulders. She smiled gently at me and said, "I think they're awful nice, don't you?"

I turned back to the window and said, "They're very nice."; I must have said it, for there wasn't anybody else in the room, but it didn't sound like my voice. It sounded like someone being strangled.

Remember, that's Angelina. She's a snotty little brat and you don't like her and you're just over here to marry her to untangle a messy situation that you don't want to get any worse. You can't stand the sight of her. You can bet your life on that, brother. You can't stand many more sights of her like that.

"Go put your damn clothes on," I said. I wondered how my voice sounded to her. It didn't sound so promising to me.

She reached down and took hold of my ankle and shook it. "You turn around, Bob, and tell me what you think of them. You didn't say a word, and you bought them for me, and I want you to like them."

I turned around and she was smiling teasingly. I tried to put the drink on the window sill but I dropped it and the glass broke and the ice skidded across the rug. I got off the bed and caught her, roughly, as you would any old bag, not half knowing what I was doing and not caring much, heedless of anything but the wildness of having to get my hands on her. She took the first kiss without much more than a gasp, but the next time she hit me and she hit me hard, with her fist doubled up, and then she was pounding on my face with both hands and struggling. I let go of her and she ran back and picked up a glass off the dresser and threw it at me. It bounced off my neck and hit the wall but it didn't break.

Her eyes were hot as she glared at me like a female wildcat. "I'll teach you," she said. "I'll teach you how to grab me like that, like a crazy man."

"O.K.," I said. "Keep your shirt on. I ought to break your damn little neck." I went back and lay down across the bed and lit another cigarette and looked out the window.

There was a long silence, as though she hadn't moved, and I began to wonder what she was doing back there, but I was so angry I didn't care. To hell with her.

Suddenly she was there beside me on the bed, facing me with her head cradled across her folded arm and looking at me contritely.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm awful sorry, Bob. Will you forgive me?"

“O.K.,” I said. “Forget it.”

“Not until you say you forgive me.” Her eyes looked at me pleadingly and her hair was spread out across her arm within inches of my face. It was beautiful hair, a little darker than golden, and I was thinking it was just the color of wild honey.

“It wasn’t anything,” I said. “And it was my fault.”

“No. It was mine. But you scared me and made me mad, the wild way you acted. You were so rough.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

She regarded me a moment, wide-eyed, and then went on softly, “You don’t have to be that rough, do you?”

She didn’t hit me this time. She put her arms up around my neck and pulled my head down like a swimmer who was drowning.

We lay side by side on the bed for a long time afterward, not saying anything and just being quiet under the cool breeze from the overhead fan. She sighed after a while and murmured something.

“What?” I asked.

“I said it’s nice here, Bob. Don’t you like it?”

“It’s nice anywhere,” I said.

She ignored it. “You know what I mean. Our room is nice.”

“Why did you do it?” I asked. I was beginning to think that Angelina was something I wouldn’t ever understand. There were too many of her.

“Do what?” she asked quietly.

“You didn’t do anything?”

“I just wanted you to see my new clothes. Because you were so nice and bought them for me.”

“Yes, I know,” I said. “And then the strangest thing happened. You just can’t account for it.”

She turned her face and smiled lazily.

“If you’re really interested in an unbiased and analytical criticism of those tag ends of clothes,” I said, “let me give you a little advice. Display them unoccupied. When you get in there you only confuse the issue.”

“I didn’t think you liked me.” She always got back to that.

“It isn’t a question of liking you, any more than of liking being hit between the eyes with a sledge hammer. It has the same effect.”

“You know something?” she said suddenly, raising up and resting her elbows on my chest and looking at me with little devils of mirth in her eyes. “Someday you’re going to slip and say something nice about me.”

“No doubt.”

“We’re getting to be better friends, aren’t we?”

“Sure, sure,” I said. “If we just keep on breaking the ice with these friendly little gestures. May I call you by your first name, now that we’re sleeping together? I somehow feel as if I knew you.”

I could have kicked myself after I’d said it. Why did I have to keep on riding her? But she didn’t flare up as I expected she would.

“You think I’m pretty rotten, don’t you?” She wasn’t angry that I could see. She was just quiet and her eyes were a little moody. I hated the thing I had said for the way it had driven the laughter out of her eyes, and I hated myself for saying it.

“No,” I said. “And I apologize for that last crack. It was just from habit, I guess. But I didn’t mean it.”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “We don’t have to pretend anything, do we?”

We were quiet for a long time and finally I said, “How do you feel about getting married? Have you ever thought about it before?”

“What girl hasn’t?”

“Anybody in particular?”

“No-o,” she said thoughtfully. “But then, I don’t know many men. Papa would never let me go anywhere or have dates. The only way I could go out with boys or even meet ‘em was to sneak out. And you know what they expect right away if you do that.”

“What could he have done if you’d just told him you were going to a dance or something in spite of his orders?”

“He would have whipped me with a leather strap.”

“You mean, when you were little?”

“No. I mean in the past two months.” She said it quietly, but with an unforgiving bitterness.

“Doesn’t he know you can’t raise a girl that way? You can’t even treat a dog like that.”

“I know. But he understands dogs. He says you mustn’t break a dog’s spirit if it’s going to be a good hunting dog.”

"I don't think he ever broke your spirit."

"No. He never would have. I guess I'm just as tough as he is. I sneaked out and I'm not ashamed of it. I guess I'm no good, the way you think, but I'd rather be that than the way he wanted me to be. I'm away from him now and I'll never go back."

"But what about your mother? She's never been like that to you, has she? And you didn't even say good-bye to her when we left."

"I feel sorry for her. She hasn't got any mind of her own any more. And I didn't say good-bye to her because I was afraid I'd cry. I hated you and I hated him and I would have died before I would have let either one of you see me cry."

"But you don't hate me so much now?"

"No. Because you were nice to me. And because you bought me those clothes. Maybe it wasn't just the clothes themselves, but the idea of anybody doing anything that nice for me. I know I'm letting you believe you just bought me with them, but I guess you'll just have to think that, and maybe it's true."

"Did they really mean that much to you?"

"Yes, Bob. There isn't any way I can make you understand just how much they do mean. You'd have to be a girl to understand."

"Are you in love with Lee?" I asked.

"No."

"Weren't you? Not at all?"

"No. I like him, and he can be awfully sweet to you, but that's all it was."

"Did you think he was in love with you?"

"He said he was going to divorce his wife and marry me."

"He would," I said. "And you believed him?"

"No. Of course not."

"Not at all?"

"You don't think I've got much sense, do you, Bob? Of course I didn't believe him. I knew what he wanted, and that was all he wanted."

"Then, in Christ's name, Angelina, why did you do it?"

She was quiet a long time and I thought she wasn't going to answer. After all, it wasn't any of my business. Then she said quietly, "Does there have to be a reason?"

“Well, hell, there ought to be a reason for everything.”

“Maybe I just wanted somebody to say he loved me, even if he was lying. And I guess I didn’t care much, anyway.”

I lay there for a while, wondering what it was like not to care when you’re eighteen.

I got up and mixed another drink and sat in the chair by the window while she was getting ready to go out. After I finished the drink I got a clean shirt out of the bag and put it on and finished dressing and wandered impatiently around the room waiting for her, feeling irritable about the heat but not quite as savage about it as I was a while ago.

When she did come out I wasn’t quite prepared for the shock of her altered appearance. I don’t know whether it was the new clothes or the new expression in the eyes, but Angelina had a different look. And that look was lovely.

She had on the brown linen suit and it fitted her perfectly. She was wearing a soft yellow blouse with the suit and had on a pair of very sheer nylons and the high-heeled white shoes. She could have been any girl you’d see on a college campus except for the hair. She had it rolled into a soft knot at the back of her neck, and while it was difficult to get used to the idea of a young girl with long hair, I found myself wondering why women had to cut it off anyway.

She turned completely around, turning her head to keep watching me, and there was that teasing smile in her slightly almond-shaped eyes. “Well, how do I look?”

“Wonderful,” I said.

“How do you like my stockings now?”

“Fine, You have beautiful legs.”

“Thank you. You know, Bob,” she went on, “you’re nice. Why are you so hard to get to know?”

“I’m antisocial. Let’s get going. You remember, don’t you? The justice of the peace?”

“Do you still want to do it?”

“What do you mean, do I still want to? I never did.”

“Well, thanks a lot! If I’m so repulsive, why do you insist on going on with it?”

So we’re going through all that again, I thought wearily.

“Come on, for Christ’s sake,” I said. “Let’s get married.”

She looked at me distastefully and turned toward the door. “I give up,” she said. “I’ll never understand you. You say something nice about me with one breath and then get mean again with the next.”

It was three o’clock and the streets were scorching under the midafternoon sun. We walked slowly along toward the courthouse with Angelina craning her neck to catch glimpses of herself in shop windows. She couldn’t get over the way she looked in her new clothes.

The J-P.’s office was hot and not very clean, and he mumbled on forever through a ragged mustache that was brown-stained on the bottom, and there were two political hangers-on for witnesses. When the mumbling was over I handed him an envelope with ten dollars in it and we came back out on the street. We stood for a minute on the courthouse steps in the shade and I began to realize it. I wasn’t a single man any more. I was married. I laughed, and Angelina looked at me queerly.

“What’s so funny?” she asked.

“I just thought of a funny story, that’s all,” I said. “It seems there were two Irishmen and one of them was named Pat and I’ve forgotten the name of the other one but I think it was Morris—”

“Do you realize that we are married?” she interrupted.

“Why, no,” I said. “I hadn’t given it a thought.”

“Sometimes I think you’re as crazy as a bedbug.”

“Where do we go from here?” I said.

She looked at me blankly and I knew that neither of us had thought of what was going to happen after the ceremony. The thing had been forced on us and we had been rushing toward it to get it over, or at least I had, and now that we had reached it and the marriage was an accomplished fact we were left standing there on the steps with nothing but an empty feeling. There was nowhere to rush to now.

“I guess this is as far as we go, isn’t it?” she asked emotionlessly. She was looking out into the street.

“I guess so. Are you going back home?”

“No.”

“Well, you’re your own boss.”

“Yes, I know.”

We were silent for a moment and then she said, "Where are you going? But I guess it isn't any of my business, is it?"

"New Orleans, I think." But that part of it seemed to have lost its interest. I couldn't work up any enthusiasm for it. "I'll start on tonight. You can stay at the hotel. I'll go back and get my stuff and clear out."

She shook her head, still not looking at me. "No. It's your room and I don't want to owe you anything. I owe you too much now." She gestured toward the linen jacket.

"You don't owe me anything."

"Yes, I do too. I would promise to pay you back for it, but I don't know whether I'll ever be able to." There was a queer streak of stubborn honesty in her, I thought.

We stood there uncomfortably a little while longer. Then she turned to me and said, "Well, thank you for everything. Good-by."

"Good-by," I said.

She turned and walked down the steps and out into the traffic on the sidewalk, paused for a second as if undecided which way to turn, and then went on up the street. I watched her, feeling like hell for some reason, noticing how straight she held her shoulders and the clean, beautiful lines of her legs as she walked and the proud tilt of her head. She was a lovely girl and very proud and stubborn, and more alone than anyone else in the world, and she probably had about twenty dollars. She wouldn't ever go home and she didn't know any way to earn her living except the way she would probably wind up by earning it, and there was something too tough in her to let her cry.

Well, what the hell, I thought, it's no skin off my nose. Am I supposed to be running a girls' school? She got herself into it; let her worry about it. But did she? What about Lee? Well, what about Lee? It takes two to get into a mess like that. If she hadn't been willing to string along, he couldn't have got anywhere alone. Yeah, with her experience, she had a lot of chance against Lee, didn't she?

Why all this moralizing? I asked myself. What difference does it make? A mess like this isn't anybody's fault, so why worry about it? The thing is, she's nothing to me, so why worry about her? Let her go.

She was in the middle of the next block before I caught up with her. I came up to her and took her arm. "Wait a minute, Angelina," I said. "You

can't go off alone like this. Let's go back to the hotel and talk it over."

Fourteen

She didn't try to shake off my hand. She just stopped and looked at me stonily. "Why?"

"How the hell do I know? It doesn't make sense, but I can't let you walk off this way. What'd become of you?"

"Well, what do you care?"

"I don't know," I said. "I guess I haven't got good sense." But I turned her around and she came back with me, not saying a word. Both of us were silent as we walked back to the hotel and went up to the room. She went over and sat down by the window and looked out.

"What are we going to do?"

"Frankly," I said, "I haven't got any idea. But we'll stay here tonight and try to think of something. The only thing I know is that I can't leave you stranded here. And you can't go anywhere without money."

"I don't want your money."

I sat down and lit a cigarette. "I don't give a damn what you want or don't want. The fact remains that I can't let you wander off alone."

She didn't reply. She only lifted her shoulders irritatingly and stared out the window. Damn such a pigheaded little brat, I thought. Why couldn't we get along without fighting?

"Look," I said, "have you ever been to Galveston? Why don't we go down there for a week and stay at the hotel right on the beach? We could have a vacation and maybe work this thing out. We might be able to decide what's to be done with you. Maybe you'd change your mind and go home."

She turned around and there was some friendliness in her eyes. "That sounds nice. I've never been to Galveston, and I always wanted to see the ocean. I've dreamed about it. But I'll tell you beforehand that you'll be wasting your time trying to get me to go home. I'm not going back."

"You just don't like it, do you?"

"I'd rather be dead."

“Well, what did you plan to do? After we were married, I mean? You surely didn’t look forward to living with me, the way we fight.”

“I didn’t plan on anything. I didn’t even plan on marrying you. That was your idea, wasn’t it?”

“Look, sister,” I said, “if you think you’ve been haunting my girlish dreams all these years, let me set you straight. You know why we’re married, so let’s drop it.”

“You’re going to go on harping on that, aren’t you?”

“No, not if I can help it. But it looks as if we’ll go on fighting as long as we’re in the same state. Why in hell can’t we get along together? Which one of us is it, you or me? What about the other people you know? Do you fight with all of them? Did you fight with Lee?”

“Of course I didn’t fight with Lee. He’s nice. And he knows how to treat girls.”

“Well, maybe it’s me.” I went over and sat down on the bed close to her. She half turned toward me, raising her eyebrows inquiringly. “Now tell me just what’s wrong with me that we start swinging at each other the minute we get within range.”

“All right,” she said, “I’ll tell you. You’re always looking for trouble. You’re big and tough, at least on the outside, and you’re sarcastic, and you never try to be friendly, and you don’t want people to be friendly with you. You just want to be left alone, and if people don’t leave you alone you want to fight ‘em. You can say nice things to a girl if you want to, but the trouble is you never want to. Today was the only time you ever did try to be nice, and that only lasted an hour or so. The rest of the time you just make nasty remarks at me and say things that don’t make sense and try to give me the idea that you think I’m a little slut. Well, I’ve told you before it don’t make any difference to me whether you think I’m no good or not, and you haven’t got any right to set yourself up as a judge. Now, does that satisfy you?”

“Yes, that would seem to answer the question.”

“You’re stubborn and you think you’re the only one who can be right and you’re too hard-boiled for anybody to get along with and you don’t care what people think, and you go out of your way to say things that hurt because you think it’s smart to make tough remarks like that.”

Well, I asked for it, I thought, and sat there silently until she finished. Her eyes were angry and flashing and I caught myself thinking they still

were beautiful even that way.

“There’s one more thing,” she said.

“Haven’t you said enough?”

“No. It wouldn’t be fair if I didn’t say this too. You could be nicer than anybody else if you wanted to be. There is something awfully nice about you, but you keep it covered up for fear somebody will see it. Now,” she went on, “you might as well tell me what you think of me. If it’s fair for one, it’s fair for the other. What is it about me you don’t like?”

I studied this for a minute, looking at her, while she waited with her eyes questioning.

“Well?”

“I’ll be damned if I know. Maybe it’s because most of the time you’re such a pigheaded little brat. And I was afraid of you.”

“Afraid?” she asked incredulously.

“Afraid of what you could do to Lee and Mary if you didn’t stay away from him. They’re two people I happen to like a lot and I didn’t want them to break up, and that’s exactly what would happen if she ever got wise to you. And he needs her.”

“Since when have you had to run everybody’s business for them?”

“Skip it,” I said. “What do you say we try to see if we can’t get along the rest of the day without fighting? Let’s pretend we’re a newly married couple on their honeymoon.”

“We are.”

“Let’s pretend we’re a newly married—” I started, and then caught myself and shut up. Maybe she was right, I thought. I do look for trouble. If I’d stop riding her we’d have a much better chance of getting along peaceably.

“I think I’ll have my hair cut,” she said. She had apparently decided to ignore my latest witticism. “I’ll go first thing in the morning and have it bobbed. I’ve been dying to for years, but Papa never would let me.”

“That’s silly. Your hair’s pretty. What do you want to cut it off for?”

“Do you really like it?” She swiftly pulled a few hairpins and shook her head and her hair fell about her shoulders in a cloud. “But it’s too long this way, isn’t it?”

She got up out of the chair and sat down beside me on the bed, sitting close and looking up at me. She took one of my hands and pushed it into the

mass of hair and it felt cool and soft and fine. I let it run between my fingers.

"That's better than fighting, isn't it?" she asked. She leaned a little toward me and smiled. I shoved my face into the cascading blonderness at the side of her throat and I could feel the pulse in my temples thumping and making the same kind of noise you make hitting the big bag. One-two. One-two.

"And I'm going to get some perfume. What kind do you like? I never had any in my life."

"You don't need it."

"Why not?"

"It'd be shooting the birds on the ground."

"Who's talking about birds?"

"I don't know," I said. "Is somebody?" The noises out in the street were closing down now and going far away and there wasn't anybody left in the world but the two of us and I tried taking a deep breath to see why breathing was so laborious and it just wouldn't go down. There didn't seem to be any room in my chest for it. She sounded a long way off and I tried to hear what she was saying. "You can be so sweet when you want to be, Bob."

I picked her up in my arms and stood up and walked around the bed away from the window. She let her head tilt back and looked up at me quietly, her eyes wide and dark.

"You're not so tough," I said.

"I don't want to be. You make me not tough."

"You're not very big either. Not big enough to be looking for trouble all the time. I could throw you right out the window from here."

"Throw me out the window, Bob. Afterward."

"Maybe I will."

She put an arm up around my neck and drew herself up until her lips were right against my face. "Say something nice to me, Bob," she whispered. "After a while you'll probably say something mean, but right now something nice. Just a little nice."

"You're the goddamnedest girl I've ever seen."

Her eyes regarded me questioningly from a distance of three inches, very soft and wide and lovely. "Is that nice?" she asked. "If it is, I like it."

I was having a hard time talking and just nodded my head. She hit me harder than anything ever had before.

Fifteen

Something awakened me in the dark and I looked at the luminous dial of my watch. It was three o'clock. And then I felt again the thing that had brought me out of my sleep; it was a hand running softly along my arm and across the shoulder. It was a small hand and smooth and cool and its touch was caressing.

"Are you awake, Bob?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry I waked you up."

"It's too hot to sleep anyway."

"What time is it?"

"Three. I must have been asleep for a couple of hours. It was about eleven when we came back from getting something to eat, wasn't it?"

"I don't know. You keep track of the time for us. But I'm real sorry about waking you up. I was feeling all the muscle in your arm. And behind your shoulder. There's regular ropes of it. Why are you so strong?"

"Clean living. Avoiding alcohol and tobacco and loose women."

"You always joke about everything, don't you? Bob, have you decided yet what we're going to do? Are you going to New Orleans today?"

"No. I don't want to go to New Orleans now."

"Why not? I thought you wanted to go."

"Not now," I said.

It was very quiet outside now, with only a lone car going by in the street now and then. We lay there in the dark without anything over us, listening to the humming of the overhead fan.

"Bob," she said after a while.

"What?"

"I want to know why you changed your mind about going down there."

"I don't know why. I just lost interest in it."

“Is it because you think you have to take care of me? You don’t have to, you know.”

“No,” I said. “That isn’t it.”

“But you don’t want me around, do you?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t ever lie, do you? You don’t ever say things you don’t mean just to keep from hurting people’s feelings. You could have said you did and it would have sounded nice even though it didn’t mean anything.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I guess I’m not very smooth.”

“But we don’t have to pretend with each other, do we? I was sort of forced on you and you don’t have to play like you like me. You don’t like me, do you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I do.”

“How much, Bob?”

“I don’t know how much.”

“You told me this morning you didn’t.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“It seems like years, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“We’ve both changed, haven’t we?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “Maybe we just found out things we didn’t know about each other.”

“What did you find out about me?”

“That a lot of the things I thought about you were wrong.”

“Do you think we could have fun together if we went to Galveston like you said? I mean, for us to pretend we were like other married people and on our honeymoon?”

“I think we could, don’t you?”

“But it’d be fun for you only just the times you were staying with me—you know—wouldn’t it?”

“No. I don’t think that. But how about you? Do you think you’d enjoy it?”

“Yes, I know I would. I’ve always wanted to see the ocean. And I like being with you more than anything when you’re not sarcastic or mean.”

“I’m sorry about that,” I said.

“Then we’ll go, won’t we?”

“Yes, we’ll go today.”

“Why couldn’t we start right now? Don’t you think that would be nice? To start in the dark, I mean, while it’s cool? Sort of exciting.”

“You’re exciting enough. Do we have to have more?”

“I’m not either exciting. What makes you think so?”

“I have ways of knowing.”

“But how about starting for Galveston now? I’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

“It’s a crazy time to start anywhere. But maybe we’re crazy anyway. Let’s go.”

When we had checked out and had the bags stowed in the back of the car and were started out of town we pulled up at an all-night café for a cup of coffee. The place was deserted except for a sleepy counterman. While he was getting the coffee I looked at our reflections in the mirror back of the counter. Angelina was excitedly looking all around the place and I studied her face in the glass, and wondered why I had thought there was no animation or sparkle about her. Maybe there hadn’t been, back there on the farm, but there was now. Her eyes were shining. She looked into the glass and caught my glance on her and our eyes met, and she smiled at me.

“We look nice, don’t we?” she said.

“Yes, we do, don’t you?”

“Your eyebrows are white. Isn’t it funny we’re both blonde?”

“We might be sisters,” I said.

“You know, I don’t know anything about you. How old you are, what your middle name is, the things you like and don’t like. Do I?”

“When I write my memoirs I’ll send you a copy.”

“Did you play football?”

“Yes.”

“In high school? Or in college?”

“Both.”

“You certainly are talkative. Why do I have to worm everything out of you? I’ll bet you were a good football player.”

“I played in the line. Nobody ever asked me to dedicate a stadium. I was down in the fine print, listed as Crane, RT.”

“What does RT mean?”

“Right tackle.”

“Did you carry the ball and make lots of touchdowns?”

“No. Not in that conference.”

“Why not?” she demanded. “You probably could have carried it better than anybody.”

I grinned. “I don’t know. Nobody ever gave it to me. I guess I wasn’t popular.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“Let’s forget about football. Nothing’s as dead as last year’s football games.”

It was still dark when we rolled out of town on the highway. I stopped and put the top back and the wind felt cool on our faces. I watched the tunnel the headlights made in the night and turned now and then to look at Angelina. She always sat with her hands in her lap, the way she had before, only now there wasn’t any sullen defiance in her eyes and they would smile happily at me when I looked around.

In another half hour it was growing light. We came over a hill and started down into the river bottom ahead of us and the east was flushed. It was still and cloudless with the summer morning’s promise of heat to come, but the air was cooler in the bottom and there were patches of mist near the ground. I stopped the car off to the left side of the road at the end of the bridge and we could see the river below in the gray light. There was a big pool there under the bridge and a long sand bar below where the water went over shallow and clear. The big white oaks out across the bottom were hazy and dark in the scattered patches of mist and on the ones nearby we could see the gray-brown rings that marked the high-water levels of the winter floods. A mockingbird was coming awake and his song was the only sound above the low gurgle of the water over the sand bar below us.

“It’s pretty, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “There’s something about rivers.”

There was no traffic along the road and we had the whole long bottom to ourselves, just the two of us and the mockingbird. Neither of us said anything for a long time as we sat there in the early-morning light watching the river, and the silence remained unbroken even after I was aware that we were no longer looking at the river, but at each other. She had turned toward me and sat with her head tilted back against the top of the seat and her cheek pressed against the leather, her eyes on my face. I looked down at her

a long time and I had never known anything like it before and I knew what it was going to be like with us from this time on and then I had my arms around her and was kissing her, feeling the wildness of it and trying to be gentle with her at the same time. Her eyes were closed and I kissed them.

“Do that again, Bob,” she said softly. “I love it when you kiss me like that.”

It might have been what she said. Or it might have been some sudden and perverse awareness of the fact that I was making love to her in the car this way and of whose car it was. I don’t know which it was, but my arms stiffened and I felt sick down in my stomach the way you do when you take a foul punch. That thing Lee had said—”Jesus, but she enjoys it. She’ll beat you to death in the seat of a car.”

She felt me stiffen up and she looked up at me questioningly as I shoved her back and got on my side of the seat under the wheel and fished out a cigarette.

“Bob, what is it?” she asked, her eyes troubled.

“Nothing, for Christ’s sake,” I said. “I just wanted a smoke.”

“Something happened. Please tell me.”

“I just suddenly remembered your advance billing. You’re supposed to be terrific in the car seat.”

“I don’t know what you mean. What’s made you change all of a sudden?”

I don’t know why I couldn’t shut up and leave it there, But the thing had hold of me and I couldn’t stop.

“What the hell are we being so lovey-dovey about, anyway? We don’t have to go through this June-moon routine just to have a little fun in the car, do we? I can’t figure how you’ve managed to keep your pants on in it this long, or is it just Lee you take ‘em off for?”

She moved back as though I had swung at her. “Did you have to say that?” was all she said, and she looked quietly down toward the water.

“Is there any reason why I shouldn’t?”

“No. None, I reckon,” she said dully.

“Of course, you could pretend I was Lee, if you’re in love with him. And there must be some of your old pants lying around here somewhere, in the glove compartment maybe, to make you feel at home.”

She looked around at me then, and the old defiance was coming back into her eyes, that to-hell-with-you-and-everything sullenness, and I grabbed her again, roughly, like a drunken tanker sailor mauling his two-dollar slut, and roughed her up as I kissed her. She hit me in the face, not scratching or clawing the way most girls would, but with her fists doubled up. She could hit hard and I felt my eyes water as she slammed my nose and I could taste the salty tang of blood in my mouth, and I laughed and kissed her again. Her left arm was pinioned against my chest but her right kept slashing at my face and I laughed again and caught it and held her. She quit then and went limp.

“All right,” she said. “All right.”

She looked down at the floor boards and I couldn't see her face. All I could see was the top of her bent head and the dark honey-colored hair and the hopeless slump of her shoulders. She didn't cry; I don't think she could cry if she wanted to. She had always fought back all her life and when she was whipped she accepted it silently, hating it but not crying. She lay there in my arms now, knowing she didn't have a chance against my strength and indifferent to anything that might happen to her. The nausea and reaction began to hit me and I let go of her and slid back and took hold of the wheel. I noticed my knuckles were white where I gripped it.

She tried to straighten out her rumpled clothes a little and then opened the door and stepped out, picking up her new purse from the seat, and started down the road without looking back. I put my head down on the curve of the wheel and didn't look after her but I could hear the click-click of her heels on the bridge, going farther and farther away, and then there was nothing but the sound of the water over the riffle down below.

I looked up after a while and she was growing smaller in the distance. The road was straight here, going for a couple of miles through the bottom on a high fill, and I watched her until she was almost out of sight. After a while a car came up from behind me and when it reached her I saw it stop and she got in and then it was gone over the bill on the far side.

Sixteen

The sun came up and the morning heat began while I sat there and a car went by now and then, stirring the red dust of the road and rattling over the bridge. I could smell the dust, dry and tickling in the nostrils, and hear the dry-weather locusts beginning to buzz, things that had always made me happy and glad to be alive in the country in midsummer and reminded me of ripening watermelons and white perch in the river bottoms, but now they didn't register at all. I stayed in the car for a long time, smoking one cigarette after another, and then I walked down below the bridge and washed the blood off my face at the head of the shallow riffle.

I picked up some driftwood and tossed it aimlessly into the pool and watched the pieces make the slow circuit of the hole in the lazy eddying current and then spill out over the bar at the lower end. My thoughts went endlessly around and around the way the bits of wood did, but there was no way they could escape into another channel. They always came back to a bowed blonde head and a hopeless voice saying, "All right. All right."

To a bowed blonde head, and why didn't you use an ax? It would have been a lot nicer weapon. To a voice saying, "Jesus, how she enjoys it. She'll beat you to death in a car." And another voice saying with bitter defeat, "All right. All right." The Crane boys are really an upstanding pair of lads, all right, and capable, too. The two of them together can destroy an eighteen-year-old girl with no trouble at all, as easily as you'd take a hundred-pound tackle out of a play. You did a good job there, all right. You fixed everything. Everything is swell now. Just fine. Well, you've got nothing to worry about now. Remembering the thing Lee said about her won't hurt you any more now. No, of course not. And it won't hurt her any more either, will it? Probably nothing will ever hurt her very much again. You get her to like you and get her to come out of her protective shell and trust you and then slap her in the face like that with everything you've got and nothing is likely to bother her again. No, everything is fine now and you won't ever

remember any of the fine things you've discovered about her the past twenty-four hours and you won't fall in love with her. And there won't be any more of that corroding jealous sickness like there was there in the car whenever you remember what Lee said. Like hell.

After a while I climbed back up the path and got in the car and started down the road. I thought about going back to Shreveport, but couldn't think of any reason for it. The car was headed in the other direction anyway, and it was too much trouble to turn it around for the difference it made.

Late that afternoon I was in Beaumont, and after wandering aimlessly around for a while I took the coast highway to Galveston. I checked in at the hotel about nine o'clock and went up to my room and took a bath and changed clothes. I couldn't stand the empty room afterward, though, and came back down. It was funny, I thought; I'd spent only one night in a hotel room with her in my life, and now it seemed that all rooms were going to be empty without her.

I rode downtown on a streetcar and stood around on Market Street for a while, trying to decide to go to a movie, but I knew I couldn't sit through one. Taking a cab in front of the interurban station, I said, "Down the line."

"Any particular house, Mac?" the driver asked.

"No," I said.

He let me out at the little café on the corner. It was the first time I'd been on Postoffice Street in years. When Lee was still at Rice we had gone down there a few times.

I went up the steps of a big two-story frame house and rang the bell. A Negro maid came in a minute and looked at me through the window and then opened the door. The parlor was on the right of the hall and I went in and there was nobody in it. There were the battered phonograph and the bare floor and the sofas around the walls and the too bright lights in the overhead fixture. I sat down on one of the sofas and lit a cigarette.

Two girls came in. One of them was a tall blonde wearing a very short dress and gilt slippers without stockings and she was smoking a cigarette in a long holder. The other one was dark-haired and smaller and she smiled at me gaily and said, "Hello, honey. Buy me a drink?"

"Sure," I said. They both sat down, the little brunette on my lap and the blonde across the room. The short dress hiked up when she sat down and I

noticed a brownish-purple bruise on the front of her thigh just above the knee.

The Negro girl came in and asked, "What you want? Rye or beer?"

We all ordered whisky and I wondered indifferently if the girls would get cold tea.

The blonde said, "You're awful quiet. What's botherin' you?"

"Nothing," I said. "I was just wondering why blondes in whorehouses are always bruised."

"Well," she said, "I bruise easy. Don't you want to come upstairs and bruise me a little, Daddy?"

"Leave him alone, Peggy," the little one said. "He's my honey. Ain't you, baby?"

"Sure," I said. "I'm your honey."

"Come on upstairs with me, honey. I like big men. I ain't ever had one too big."

"I'll bet you haven't," I said.

"What do you mean by that? Why, you big bastard—"

"Oh, hell, forget it."

She got off my lap and went over and put a record on the phonograph. When the music started she came back out to the center of the floor and stood, tapping her shoes and wiggling her hips in time with the rhythm.

I got up and danced with her. "What's your name, Big Boy?" she asked, looking up at me. She came only up to my shoulder.

"Whitey," I said.

"Mine's Billie. Don't you like me?"

"Sure," I said. "I like you a lot."

"You sure act like it. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing. I just haven't had time to warm up yet. We need another drink."

We had some more drinks and then I danced with Peggy. She would have been a good dancer except for the professional zeal with which she rubbed herself against me. She was too busy drumming up trade to enjoy dancing for its own sake.

A Coast Guard sailor came in and danced with Billie and when we stopped dancing and had another drink he took Peggy over in a corner and sat down with her in his lap. He was about half drunk and insisted on

buying us all a drink, so we had one and then I bought a round. He kept on asking me if I didn't have a brother in the Coast Guard because there was a fella, he said, when he was up in Alaska on the patrol boat that looked just like me.

We had some more music and the sailor and Peggy tried to do an apache routine and the sailor fell down and she bounced and skidded into one end of the sofa. They got up laughing uproariously and went upstairs.

"He's her boy friend," Billie said. "He comes to see her all the time and they fight to beat hell. He's the one that put the bruises on her, and last month she hit him between the eyes with her shoe. Made both of 'em black."

"Very touching," I said.

"You're grouchy, baby. Come on, let's have a little fun. Don't you want to go upstairs with me?"

"Sure." What the hell, I thought. We went down the hall and up the stairs to her room.

When we were inside she pulled off her dress and she didn't have on anything underneath it. She kicked off her slippers and got a towel out of a dresser drawer and lay down on the bed, watching me. She was a thin girl and rather pretty, and nice in a tomboyish sort of way. I sat down on the side of the bed and lit a cigarette.

"What's the matter, Whitey?" she asked. "Come on."

"Don't rush me," I said.

"Well, I must be slippin'," she complained. "It's the first time I ever took my clothes off and a man could just sit there smokin' a cigarette."

"You're not slipping, Billie," I said. I fished a five-dollar bill out of my pocket and tossed it on the bed by her arm and stood up. "I'll see you around sometime."

I opened the door and went out, and as it closed behind me I heard her say, "Well, I'll be damned. Of all the crazy bastards!"

Seventeen

It was about three the next afternoon when I went into this bar on 24th Street, the one where the trouble started. I had the car with me by this time, and I remembered going back to the hotel for something, I wasn't sure what. I had been drinking steadily ever since I had come into town, but it didn't seem to have much effect except to make me feel worse.

It was a cheap sort of place with a rough-board bar and some flimsy tables. A bunch of seamen were parked on stools at the other end of the bar, talking and laughing a lot. I sat down at this end and ordered whisky.

The bartender was big, about my size, and tough-looking. His whole aspect said "ex-pug" to anyone who knew the signs.

"Just leave the bottle out here where I can reach it, pal," I said. "I might want more than one."

"How do I know you can pay for it?" he asked suspiciously.

"You don't," I said. "Just leave it."

He left the bottle there and put his hands on the bar. "Smart guy, ain't you? Well, let me give you a little tip. Don't start nothing around here."

"Write me a long letter about it sometime," I said. "I'd love to hear from you."

He gave me a hard stare that lasted the length of time it took me to pour another drink and throw some change on the bar, and then he walked away, giving me the business out of the corners of his eyes as he went.

Where do you suppose she is right this minute? She could be anywhere except home. She'd never go home. How much money did she have? How could she earn a living? You know damn well the only way she could earn her living, and the way she feels after the treatment she's been getting, she probably doesn't much care how soon she starts. Especially after the beautiful demonstration you gave her of what to expect from her fellow beings. You really helped her a lot. You helped yourself a lot too, didn't you? Why don't you go on back to the hotel and take a shower and have a

nice sleep? You know why not, don't you? Well, anyway, you're not in love with her, are you? Of course not. You just sit around these swank little tearooms because you like the decor and you enjoy the company of that cute bartender. The sonofabitch. You could go on back downtown and see a movie. You'd enjoy sitting through one. Sure you would. Or you could go on back to the farm. That's going to be fun, living out there alone with all those beautiful hours of speculation as to where she is and what she's doing. And what she must think of you. Don't forget that. That's the nice part. Well, anyway, you have some nice things to remember about those twenty-four hours with her. A vanquished honey-colored head and a beaten voice saying, "All right. All right." Sam Harley couldn't break her spirit in eighteen years, but you came as near to breaking it in ten minutes as anyone ever will. You're an exceptional guy, all right.

A man wearing a suit with too much padding in the shoulders came in and sat on the next stool. He was about my age and looked like some sort of sharpshooter, a small-time gambler, maybe, or pimp.

"Do you mind if I pour one out of that bottle, Mac?" he asked.

"You can pour it in your hair if you want to," I said.

He poured a drink into a glass the bartender set in front of him.

"Hiya, Jack, you big devil, how's tricks?" he greeted the bartender. They seemed to be old pals. I ignored their conversation and lit a cigarette. Square Shoulders poured another drink out of the bottle. Jack stopped in front of me.

"That'll be eighty cents," he said, spreading his big freckled paws on the bar.

"What'll be eighty cents?"

"Them two drinks." He nodded toward Square Shoulders' empty glass.

"All right," I said. "It'll be eighty cents. So what?"

"Eighty cents on you. Pay up."

"You know what you can do with your eighty cents," I said.

"Now, wait a minute, Blondy," Square Shoulders said. "Maybe you just don't understand what you're getting into. Jack here's a regular guy, but you don't want to get wrong with him. Ain't that right, Jack?"

"You gonna pay?" Jack asked. I could see that the way I was feeling, a little of Jack was going to go a long way. His conversation palled on you after the first few bars.

“Come on now, Blondy,” Square Shoulders said, putting his hand on my arm. “You asked me to have them drinks with you, didn’t you?”

“You can buy your own drinks, you goddamned pimp,” I said. I put my hand in his face and pushed. He went over backward with the stool on top of him.

Jack was coming around the end of the bar and I got up off the stool. He looked big, and I knew he probably had twenty pounds on me. But tending bar doesn’t do much for you, and he had a roll of fat around his belly. At least, I hoped it was fat.

I hit him first and this seemed to surprise him a lot. He’d no doubt been bouncing drunks and barroom brawlers for so long he’d forgotten what it was like to have somebody get under his guard. He came on in, though, and jabbed me. For a man his size he was fast, plenty fast.

He hit me a couple of times and I found out something else about him, the reason he was tending bar in a joint like this instead of fighting. For all his size, he couldn’t punch his way out of a cardboard box. I let him hit me again and then moved in close and started slugging the roll of fat around his middle. That was where he lived, all right. I could hear him suck in wind every time I landed. Square Shoulders got up and bolted past us toward the door and I stuck out a foot and he fell into the door on his face. He finally made it outside with blood running into his mouth. Of course, while I was doing this, Jack let me have it and knocked me down. You can’t have any hobbies or side lines when you’re fighting with a pro, even a poor one.

When the cops got there the place was a mess. They got us separated and put me into a patrol wagon. My face was covered with blood but I couldn’t be sure how much of it was mine and how much Jack’s. He had cut my face up pretty badly in several places and I had a very sore left hand.

The next morning in court it was ten dollars and costs for drunk and disorderly, which was light considering the total damage to the place, and I gathered that Jack’s establishment wasn’t too highly thought of and nobody worried much about what happened to it. I refused to pay the fine. I don’t know why. It didn’t make sense, even to me, for the hotel room would cost me more than the fine by the time I got out, but I felt bad and didn’t care much anyway.

It must have been around two P.M. When the jailer came around and unlocked the door and motioned to me. “You, Big Boy,” he said.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Turnin’ you out. Your fine’s been paid.”

I grunted and went with him. He was crazy, I supposed, or he had his guests mixed up, because there wasn’t anybody in Galveston who’d be paying my fine. Or anyone who even knew I was in jail, for that matter. But that was his funeral, not mine.

At the desk they handed back my knife and watch and an envelope with my money in it. There was about eighty dollars.

“Some sport,” the sergeant said as he watched me count it. “You with a roll like that and letting your wife pay your fine.”

I wondered whose wife was going to be disappointed when the old man didn’t get home. “Wait till I take down my hair,” I said, “and we’ll both have a good cry.”

“Beat it, wise guy, before we run you in again, on a vag.”

I beat it. I was walking down the steps outside when I saw her. She was diagonally across the street in the doorway of a cheap restaurant where she could stay almost hidden and still watch the steps of the police station. I made no sign that I had noticed her and went through an elaborate business of lighting the last cigarette I had while I tried to decide what to do. If I waved and started toward her she might try to get away, since it was obvious she didn’t want me to see her. And I didn’t want to go chasing a girl through the streets, not with my face and clothes looking the way they were. I’d be picked up as a sex maniac or escaped lunatic inside three blocks, if I didn’t have my head blown off by some outraged citizen before the cops got me.

Crossing the street slowly and looking straight ahead, I turned and started up past the café. I didn’t look toward the place, but I was sure she would move back inside the doorway. She did. When I suddenly made a quick turn into the entrance, she was there and we were face to face.

“Hello, Angelina,” I said. I was conscious of thinking that as an opening remark that would probably establish a new all-time high in stupidity, but I couldn’t think of anything else.

She didn’t say anything. She looked at me just once and then tried to get past me back onto the sidewalk with her eyes averted. I reached out and caught her arm and she stopped.

"I don't know what to say, Angelina," I said. "Will you walk up the street with me a little way? Maybe I can think of something."

"I reckon so," she said.

We walked slowly along in the hot sun with people turning to stare at my cut-up face and the blood on my clothes and I held onto her arm all the way for fear she would somehow disappear. But I couldn't put any of the things I wanted to say into words.

We kept on going on out 20th Street toward the beach, block after block in silence. Finally she said, "You're holding my arm awful tight. It's beginning to go to sleep."

"I'm sorry," I said, and self-consciously released my grip.

"How did you get to Galveston?" I asked after a while.

"A man and his wife gave me a ride to Beaumont. I rode the bus from there."

"How did you know I was in jail?"

"I happened to be out on the sea wall by the hotel yesterday morning and saw you drive away from there in the car going toward town. I was out looking at the water. Around noon I saw the car again, parked over that way"—she waved in the direction of 24th—"and this morning I happened to be going by there again and it was still there. I asked some men at the taxi place across the street if they had seen you and they told me about the police taking you away in a paddy wagon. I didn't know what a paddy wagon was, but I figured out it must mean they had put you in jail, so I went over there and they said you could get out if I paid your fine. So I paid it."

I couldn't look at her, "Why?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said simply.

"There must have been some reason."

"I thought maybe you needed help. Maybe you didn't have enough money left to pay it yourself. And I owed it to you."

"Yes, you owe me a lot," I said. "You're deeply indebted to me."

"It cost you a lot of money, buying these clothes for me, and you were awful nice to me sometimes."

I knew I couldn't take much more of it, and I knew too that she wasn't doing it intentionally. She really meant it. I had hurt her terribly, but still that streak of bitter and uncompromising honesty of hers wouldn't let her

forget that I had—just for a few moments, anyway—done something she regarded as nice.

“You didn’t want me to see you there outside the jail, did you?”_

She waited a long time before she answered. “I don’t know, Bob. It’s all kind of mixed up. I wanted to see you again and maybe even be with you, but still I didn’t. There’s something sort of wonderful about being with you when you act like you like me, but you can turn so mean without any warning and you can be so awful hard. I don’t know why the things you say hurt so much.”

I stopped there on the corner and took hold of both her arms and turned her around facing me. We were standing in front of a billboard on a vacant lot in the hot sun, with cars going past us in the street, but it didn’t make any difference. I had to tell her.

“I promised you once I wouldn’t ever be mean to you again, didn’t I? And I broke it the next day. So I won’t promise again, but I’ll try to tell you what happened there by the river. I don’t know how I can tell you, because I don’t think I know myself. The only thing I can think of is that it was jealousy. It hit me so suddenly I didn’t have time to think.”

“Why? I mean, I don’t understand why you would be jealous.”

“Because of Lee and all that other business. The car. You know what I mean. I’m not trying to hurt you now, Angelina; I’m just trying to explain to you.”

“But why did it make any difference to you? It didn’t before.”

“That was before. And a long time ago.”

“Not so very. Nothing has been a long time ago with us. It’s only been three days.” She was looking down, tracing a design on the pavement with the toe of her shoe, and I noticed how scuffed and dirty it was. White shoes weren’t for hitchhiking.

“Just three days. But I didn’t love you then. I do now.”

She thought it over quietly for a minute before she answered. “It’s that way with me too, Bob.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. That’s the reason I came down here. I thought I might see you again. It was just a chance that you might decide to come on down here instead of going somewhere else.”

“You don’t hate me for what I said? And did?”

“No. Not now. I think I finally figured it out for myself and guessed what was the matter. I wouldn’t have followed you except for that. But you won’t do it again, will you, Bob? I couldn’t stand it again.”

“No. That’s all finished,” I said.

I kept it from her, all right, this fear I had, but I couldn’t fool myself any about it. Was there any way of being sure it wouldn’t happen again? How could there be?

Eighteen

The desk clerk regarded me suspiciously when I registered again with Angelina and wanted to be moved into a double room. The combination of my whiskery, cut-up face with its evidence of a two-day binge and a wife who showed up unexpectedly with no luggage was obviously a little strong to take straight, but he managed it and moved us into a room overlooking the beach.

When the boy had gone I picked her up and walked over and sat down with her in the armchair by the window. We were silent for a long time and just sat there holding onto each other and listening to the swish of the surf beyond the sea wall.

"You'll hold me a lot, won't you?" she asked at last. "Like this. So I'll forget about last night and the night before that."

"Were they bad?"

"Awful. I kept trying not to think about not seeing you any more. But you can't make yourself not think, can you?"

"No," I said. "You can't turn it off."

"Did you miss me, Bob?"

"Yes."

"Very bad?"

"Very bad. And on top of that was the way I'd hurt you. That was something to live with."

"Don't think about it now."

She leaned back against my arm and ran her fingers lightly over the bruises and cut places on my face. "Poor face. Poor old sweet face, it's all hurt."

"It's not hurt."

"You tell me who did it and I'll go scratch his eyes out."

"Let's forget about my face and talk about something nicer. Yours, for instance."

“No. I will not forget about it. It’s a beautiful face and I love it. And I want to fix up the cut places.”

I lost interest in my face as a topic of conversation in a very short while, so I kissed her.

That changed the subject for both of us, all right. I wondered why kissing her could always cloud up the issue in a way that whisky never could. The jagged edges of facts and the sharp corners of realities became blurred and softened and all the noises muted.

“I love you so,” I said.

“What is it like with you, Bob? Do things seem to sort of run together? Is it like flying through colored clouds?”

“Right now it’s like having a high fever and being full of quinine. Everything’s fuzzy and my ears hum.”

“It doesn’t sound very nice for you. Maybe what you need is a doctor.”

“All right,” I said. “Call a doctor.”

“No. But I want it to be nicer for you. I want you to see the colors. Big clouds of colors swinging around and passing through each other. I don’t think men have any fun being in love. Don’t you see any colors?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Even with your eyes closed?”

“I didn’t close them. I don’t think I did.”

“Kiss me again, with your eyes closed.”

I kissed her again and I think I closed my eyes, but it wasn’t any different. There was the wildness of it and a paradoxical tenderness and a feeling of suffocation, but it was just the same.

“Did you see them?”

I shook my head.

“Poor men. They don’t have any fun. No colors.”

“I see the ones that are you. Like your hair. It’s a beautiful color. It’s just a little lighter than wild honey.”

“That’s nice, but it isn’t the same thing. You don’t just see these colors. You feel them.”

“I can see your hair and feel it, too. Against my face.”

“I want you to. I’m going to have it bobbed tomorrow and you’ll like it even better.”

“No, I won’t. It couldn’t be any better. And let’s not talk about tomorrow. We’re in no condition for long-range planning.”

“We’re not?”

“No. Planning requires great clarity of thought.”

“I don’t want any what-you-said of thought. I just want you to kiss me.”

“That’s better,” I said. “More kissing; less planning.”

“You can’t plan when you’re kissing me?”

“Not objectively.”

“Why not?”

“How could I kiss you and do anything objectively?”

“We won’t plan about the hair then? Not now?” she murmured.

“No.”

“Have you ever felt this way about anybody before, Bob?”

“No. Not ever.”

“We couldn’t have felt this way about anybody before, could we?”

I closed my eyes and put my face down against her throat and prayed I wouldn’t see Lee again, or hear him. Let’s don’t hear that thing again. Wasn’t once enough to hear it? It doesn’t mean anything now anyway. It was a thousand years ago in another place, and another girl named Angelina. Not this one.

We didn’t go back out any more that afternoon or night. We had supper brought up to us and ate with the cool breeze from the Gulf blowing in through the window and afterward sat watching the people go by on the sea wall.

Once, while we were lying quietly in the dark, she stirred suddenly in my arms and said, “Oh, Bob, the car!”

“What about the car?”

“We didn’t bring it back. It’s still downtown where you left it.”

I laughed. “Well, what if it is?”

“Won’t somebody be apt to steal it?”

“That would be fine.”

“Oh.” There was silence for a minute, and then she said, “You don’t like the car, do you?”

“It’s something like that, I guess. I don’t like for us to be in it.”

“That was what it was when we had that fight by the river, wasn’t it? It was the car that suddenly made you remember things, that made you mad.”

“Let’s don’t talk about it.”

“We won’t, if you say so, but I’d rather talk about it than to have it coming between us. I’m sorry about it, but I’m not ashamed.”

“You shouldn’t be. I think I understand it all, Angelina. Let’s just bury it.”

The next morning I was awake in the early dawn. It was cooler, with a light breeze blowing off the water and the low-flying clouds that mean a clear day later on. The sea wall was deserted and quiet and the low sound of the surf beyond was peaceful. Angelina was sleeping quietly beside me, with her cheek on the crook of her arm and the cloud of hair spreading across the pillow. I leaned over and kissed her on the throat and she opened her eyes and smiled.

“You need a shave. Your whiskers stabbed me on the throat.”

“It’s a fine day,” I said. “We’ve got lots to do.”

“Oh, can we plan now?”

I grinned. “At the moment, yes.”

“All right. What do we have to do?”

“First we have to cash a draft. We need some more money.”

“Oh, I forgot to tell you. I’ve still got about fifteen dollars of your money. I meant to give it back to you.”

“My money? Haven’t you realized yet what that man was mumbling about back there in Shreveport the other day? It’s our money now.”

“All right, smarty, I’ll keep it. But you say we have to have some more? Why? And how do we get it?”

“We have to have more because I’ve only got about seventy-five left and we’re going to be here a week. And we’ve got to buy you some more clothes and a traveling bag and a bathing suit and”—I gave the sheet a sharp tug—“a nightgown. Look at you.”

She smiled at me lazily, uncovered to the waist. “Do I need a nightgown? Why?”

I looked at her and began to feel less like the great planner. “I’ll be damned if I know now.”

“Go on and tell me why I need one.”

“Well, we could get you one eight feet long and made out of canvas with a drawstring at each end, so I could think out our schedule.”

She pulled the sheet over her, clear up over her head, with only one brown eye looking out. "Now go ahead. I can see your thinking is too easy to interrupt. The teenciest little thing upsets you."

"And after we get all this stuff done, we'll go swimming in the surf," I went on.

"Couldn't we go this morning? There was a sign on the pier saying they rented suits."

"Put you in one of those gunny sacks? Like hell we will. It'd be a sacrilege, like dressing Helen of Troy in a burlap bag."

"I knew it." The one brown eye regarded me impishly.

"You knew what?"

"That when you did want to, you could say nicer things than anybody."

"Nuts," I said. "I'm a great oracle and I speak only profound truths."

"Great oracle yourself. You're just sweet."

"That's no way to speak to oracles. I'll take it up with the union."

She bobbed her head out from under the sheet. "Is there any room in this big schedule of yours where I'm going to get my hair cut?"

"You don't seriously mean to cut it off, do you?" I said.

"Of course, silly. Haven't I been telling you for the last two or three days? I'm going to have it cut real short. I saw a girl on the street the other day and hers was cut that way and curled up in little curls close to her head and it was the cutest thing you ever saw, and mine is naturally wavy so it wouldn't be hard to make it stay and that's the way I want to do it, and I almost went up to her and asked her where they did it and—" She was talking faster and faster and started to sit up in bed, carried away with the project. I put a hand over her mouth.

"Relax," I said. "Saying hair to you is like breaking a fire main." She bit my hand.

"I can get it cut today, can't I?"

"I don't think you ought to cut it off. I think it's beautiful the way it is."

"Yes, but how do you know what it'll be like cut short? It'll be lots prettier."

"No. It couldn't be."

"It's my hair, Bob Crane, and I'll do what I damned please with it." She hitched away from me on the bed with the sheet up to her ears 'and her eyes angry. There was that stubborn-mule look in them.

“You’ll like hell do what you please,” I started, and then caught myself and shut up. After all, it was her hair, and Sam Harley had been telling her she couldn’t cut it all these years and trying to browbeat her, and look where he had wound up in her eyes. You couldn’t get anywhere by trying to bully her. She didn’t bully worth a damn. You might get your way if you overpowered her, but it wouldn’t be worth what you lost in the process.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “We’ll have it done today. I didn’t mean to get tough about it. It’s just that I think it’s so lovely the way it is.”

“I’m sorry, too. Oh, Bob, I don’t want to be stubborn about it, and I won’t do it if you absolutely don’t want me to. But I know you’ll like it better the other way. And all my life somebody has been telling me what to do with it and I didn’t like it when you started to sound like Papa.”

I grinned. “Well, it’s all set I don’t want to wind up where Papa did.”

It was only about seven-thirty when we came out of the hotel, so we walked along the sea wall a long way before we went downtown, with Angelina excitedly asking questions about the shrimp boats offshore and whether any big ships tied up at the swimming pier and laughing at herself when I explained that the water was only about four feet deep under it. She insisted we go down on the beach and look for shells. After a while we came back and caught a streetcar and had breakfast at a restaurant near the interurban. She wouldn’t eat anything except some sliced bananas and kept telling me how we looked in the mirror that was on the wall across from our table.

We hunted up a beauty shop and I left her there while I went off to see about the bank draft. When we parted in front of the place, she said, “What on earth are you looking at, Bob?”

“Your hair,” I said. “I’m seeing it for the last time and I want to remember what it looked like if this new business is a flop.”

She laughed. “You’ll be back in about an hour, won’t you? I don’t like you to be away from me.”

“Yes,” I said. “But you’ll probably be in there two hours or longer. You may have to wait, because I think you’re supposed to have an appointment.”

I looked up an old friend of the Major’s who was in a cotton firm and he went down to his bank with me and helped me cash a draft. I bought a traveling bag for Angelina and had her initials put on it and told the shop to

deliver it to the hotel and then went to a florist's shop and ordered some flowers. When I had finished this I walked down Market to 24th and the car was still there across from the bar. One of the taxi drivers in front of the cab stand next door grinned at me as I went by and said, "Say, ain't you the guy that tangled with Jack the other day?"

"Yeah," I said.

"He's been telling it big about what he'll do if you ever show up down here again. Says the reason you haven't picked up your car is because you're afraid to come back."

I went on to the car. His eagerness to see a free fight was a little disgusting. In front of the place I hesitated and wondered if I should go in, but then I remembered I was supposed to meet Angelina in about a half hour and went across the street and got in the car and drove off, feeling proud of myself as a married man with responsibilities. I wondered at it a little. Before, the prospect of another fight with Big-mouthed Jack would have had an irresistible allure.

I parked across the street from the beauty shop and waited. After a while she came out of the shop and stood looking up and down the street. I felt warm and happy watching her and waited a minute before I hit the horn and waved at her. The close-cropped hair was a shock, as I had known it would be, but now with the sun on it and striking fire in the curls I could see that it was going to be easy to live with and that by the time she got ready to change it again I would be just as outraged as I had been this time. I got out and went across the street and she waited for me eagerly.

"Well?" she asked.

"You're right," I said. "I was talking through my hat all the time. It's lovely."

"Feel," she said. I put my hand on the side of her head, very gently so as not to muss anything, and felt the brush of the ringlets against my palm.

"Let's go back to the hotel," I said.

She grinned at me. "No. You have too much trouble working out your schedules back there. Let's stay downtown until we get finished."

We went around to one of the department stores and picked out a blue bathing suit and a woolly beach robe of canary yellow and some sandals and a bathing cap. I bought some bathing trunks for myself while she ran ecstatically through their stock shopping for more clothes. We filled the car

with bundles and went back to the hotel. The flowers were there in the room when we came in. She put her arms up around my neck and pulled down hard, with that way she had, like a drowning swimmer, and with her lips against my ear she whispered fiercely, "Hold me tight like this, Bob. Don't ever let me go."

Nineteen

Those six days were wonderful.

We would go swimming in the surf in the early morning, sometimes before sunrise, and lie on the sand afterward and talk and come in at nine or later, ravenous for breakfast. She never seemed to tire of battling the surf or of marveling at the existence of it. It was a source of continual surprise to her that the Gulf was never calm, and she would never call it the Gulf, but always the ocean.

Most of the girls who came down to the beach were content to wade out a little way and then come back and drape themselves attractively around on the sand, but Angelina wanted more of it than that. The water fascinated her and she seemed to derive some strange exhilaration from fighting with the rollers, and the higher they came, the better she liked it. And the strange part of it was that she couldn't even swim at first. I took her to the pool up the sea wall every afternoon and gave her lessons and she learned fast.

She turned heads whenever she appeared on the beach and shed the yellow robe, and she knew it, all right, but just lounging around on the sand was always secondary with her to the thrill of the waves. When she did finally tire of it we would go up on the sand and sprawl and I would always lie down near her and smoke a cigarette and watch her while she took off the white bathing cap and shook out the curls.

She would grin at me. "Why do you always lie where you can see me, and look at me like that?"

"Now, that's a brilliant question," I said. "You wouldn't have any idea at all how you look in that suit, would you?"

"Do you like it?"

"Just when you're in it. Or should I say, when you're partly in it. I can't look at you without running a temperature of a hundred and four. That's sex at its very worst, isn't it? And still it all seems good and right. Maybe the symptoms are all wrong and we are pure and our love is platonic."

“What’s platonic?” she asked, and I told her.

She laughed. “Well, I guess it hasn’t been very platonic so far, but we could begin now, couldn’t we?”

“Right now,” I said. “We’ll begin this morning.”

“It sounds like fun. I always wanted to sit on a pedestal. I’ve read about it in books. How long do you think we ought to try it?”

“At least as long as we’re out here on the beach. We want to give it a fair trial.”

We were silent for a long time and finally she threw a handful of sand on my shoulder and said, “What are you thinking about? You’re so solemn.”

“Angelina. Your name. It’s so musical and has a sort of rippling sound to it. Why did they name you that? Is it after the river?”

“Yes,” she said. “I was born in the Angelina River bottoms, when Papa was renting a farm there. Do you think it’s silly?”

“I think it’s beautiful. I’m glad you were born there. Suppose you had been born up north. On the Penobscot or the Schuylkill.”

“Would you have loved me?”

“I would have loved you if you’d been born on the north fork of the Yangtze Kiang.”

One night when we were lying in darkness in the room, late, after the noises out on the sea wall had died away and there was only the eternal sound of the Gulf and I thought she was asleep, she suddenly threw her arms about my neck and pressed her face against my neck. “Bob,” she whispered, “let’s don’t ever go back. Can’t we always stay here?”

“It has been wonderful, hasn’t it?” I agreed.

“Oh, it isn’t just that, Bob. I was so miserable back there, and all this has been so—so—I don’t know how to say it, but I always kind of choke up when I think about it, and about you, and I’m afraid to go back. Is there any way we could stay?”

“No,” I said. “I have to go back to work.”

“But you don’t have to work there, do you? You could work here or somewhere else, couldn’t you?”

“No. Remember, the farm’s there and we have to live on it.”

“But you don’t have to live on a farm. You could do a lot of things. Think of what you learned in college.”

I grinned in the darkness, thinking about what I'd learned in college. Opening up holes in the line or knowing how to counter a left hook wasn't exactly valuable in later life, particularly when you weren't good enough for the pros in either one.

"I'm sorry, Angelina," I said. "But I like living on the farm, and I'm going to show you how to like it too. It'll be different from what you've known of it."

She sighed. "I know that, Bob. Anywhere I lived with you would be fun and I want you to be happy, and I won't say any more about it. Only sometimes I get scared when I think about going back."

We went dancing nearly every night. She had never danced in her life and I'm no gazelle on the floor, but I taught her to follow in a short time, and with the natural grace of all her movements and a good sense of rhythm she was soon ready for more accomplished dancers than I, not that she ever got a chance at them.

One of the few bad moments I had during the six days occurred while we were dancing. The band was playin "Stardust" and we were swaying close together when she looked up at me and said, "You know, Bob, I was just thinking of how many things you've taught me. How to swim, and how to dance, and of course you showed me how to be happier than anybody else in the world. It seems like you taught me everything."

Every thing but one, I thought, and Lee had to teach her that. I missed a step and almost tripped, and then recovered and went on. I don't think she noticed.

There was one speck of comfort in it, though, I thought. I noticed that the thing never did get me completely down to the point where I blew up, the way it had that morning by the river. I wondered if I was beginning to get control of it, or whether the ugly shock of it was beginning to wear off with repetition.

I wondered for a moment if that business was the thing she had said she was afraid of, the thing that made her scared to go back. But no, I knew she wasn't in love with Lee. And as far as anything Lee would do or say—well, after all, he was my brother and we'd have nothing to fear from him.

The only way I could ever account, afterward, for this blindness was just that I didn't understand how much Lee had changed and was changing.

I didn't think of Lee and Mary very often those six days. It was too difficult to think of anyone else at all. Once or twice I found myself wondering what was happening back home and if there was a chance that Sam Harley had scared Lee enough to make him stop and think. I hoped so. I was afraid for him if he ever lost Mary, and I know that he could lose her. It had always been Lee for her ever since we were children, but she had a lot of pride, and someday he might hand her more than that pride would let her take.

On the last evening we drove far down the island to a long, deserted stretch of beach, and there, just after sunset, we parked the car and gathered driftwood for a fire. When the fire was burning fiercely and throwing sparks into the deepening twilight we changed into our suits, one on each side of the car, and ran down to the water. There was a strong breeze blowing up from the south and the surf was running high, breaking far out on the first bar with a booming thunder that filled and overrode everything in this world we had to ourselves. We went far out and felt the force of it and the salt taste of it in our mouths and I kept close to her always, trying to see the white bathing cap against the seething white of the breakers in the darkness and feeling her come pounding back against me in the pushing force of the sea, the warm smoothness of her body against me for an instant and then sliding past in the confusion of darkness and water, something silken that had brushed against me and was gone. I would plunge after her and catch her in the backwash and we would stand braced against the pull of the outgoing current, laughing, and I would kiss her, tasting the salt on her mouth, and then another toppling sea would loom over us and break and send us sprawling into the churning white.

We went back up the beach to the fire, which had burned down to a bed of red coals. The big log I had put across the middle of it was burned in two and I piled the ends on the embers and the wind fanned them into flame. We got out the rolls and wieners and the long-handled wire fork I had bought at the five-and-ten-cent store, and roasted the wieners over the coals. Afterward we lay back on the yellow robe and watched the wind searching among the embers and sending the sparks flying out across the empty dunes. The beach was dark for miles and we were the only people on a black, wild continent. She had the bathing cap off and the glow of the dying fire highlighted the curls and warmed the smooth lines of her body.

“I wonder if we’ll ever come back to Galveston again, Bob,” she said.

“Yes,” I said. “We can come back.”

“I don’t know whether I want to or not,” she said slowly. “Maybe we oughtn’t. Somehow it couldn’t ever be like this again, because nothing could be, and it would be better if we could always remember it like this.”

I didn’t say anything and we turned from looking at the fire, and it was the way it had been that morning at the river when we couldn’t get enough of seeing each other, only this time there was no Lee or the thought of Lee, and after a long time I kissed her and there was a wildness in her like that of the sea running out there in the darkness, a wildness and a fierce urgency that was like nothing I had ever known before. The booming of the surf was a sound we would both hear as long as we lived.

We left at noon the next day and as I drove the car across the causeway she was quiet. She looked back once and when she caught my glance on her she smiled a little but didn’t say anything.

Twenty

It was about ten P.M. When we arrived back in town. Our reception was anything but heartening. When we rolled up to the stop line going into the square, Grady Butler, one of the sheriff's deputies, flagged me. He came over and put his foot on the running board.

"Bob," he said, "I wish you and that wild-haired brother of yours would get together about this car."

"What's the trouble?" I asked.

"Trouble? Why, he comes in the office in the courthouse about three days ago and reports his car stolen. We get the license number and everything and put out pickup notices on it, and then I find out from somebody else that it's not stolen at all and that you've got it. So I jump him about it and he says he don't remember it, he must have been drunk."

"Was he?" I asked.

"Drunk? Sure he was. He was drunk both times. I wish you birds would get together. There's enough headaches in this business without guys like Lee Crane makin' it worse."

"O.K.," I said. "I'm taking the car back to him now and I'll see if I can't straighten him out. You haven't seen him around the last hour or so, have you?"

"No, thank God."

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, he's been on a ring-tailed tear for the past week and I get tired of keeping him out of trouble."

Somebody behind us began blasting his horn impatiently, so Butler stepped back and waved and we drove on. I was worried as we went out North Elm and didn't feel any better when we pulled up in front of the old house and found it dark. There was nobody home at all and I wondered where Mary was.

There wasn't any use in wasting any more time tonight, I thought, so we drove on out to the farm. There was no light in the house across the road when we turned into the driveway, but I hadn't expected any because it was past Jake's and Helen's bedtime.

We stopped under the sweet-gum trees and I turned to Angelina and said, "This is it. We're home." She had been very quiet since we had left town. We went up on the porch and when I had opened the door I picked her up and carried her through.

"I've been hoping all the way that you'd do that, Bob," she said simply.

I walked down the hall, still carrying her, feeling my way, and went into the back bedroom. It was hot inside the closed house and absolutely still and the blackness seemed to press in on us.

"Hold me, Bob," she whispered. "Don't put me down. I'm scared."

I could feel her trembling. "There's nothing to be afraid of," I said.

"I know it. I'm just nervous, I guess. But something scares me."

I sat down on the bed and held onto her for a while until the shaking subsided. Then I got up and opened the back door and raised the windows and lit, one of the lamps. She smiled at me, a little shamefaced.

"I don't know what was the matter. I must be crazy. I won't be like that any more."

We went around to all the rooms so she could see them. She had seen the place before, of course, having lived all her life across the Black Creek bottom, but she'd never been inside it. She liked it and was pleased with the furniture I had collected, but there was something subdued in her manner.

When we came to the kitchen she examined everything thoroughly, even looking at the cooking utensils and into the cupboards where the food was kept.

"Don't worry about the kitchen now," I said. "Helen will be over in the morning and cook breakfast for us." I had already told her about our arrangement, of course.

I thought she looked at me queerly, but she didn't say anything, and I forgot it. Mary and Lee were on my mind anyway and I was too preoccupied to notice much.

The next morning when I opened my eyes it was just becoming light. It was too early to get up, at least for this time of year when the crops were laid by and there wasn't much to do, so I started to go back to sleep when I

noticed she wasn't there with me. Then I heard stove lids clattering out in the kitchen.

I crossed the dining-room linoleum on my bare feet and looked in. She was fully dressed and was building a fire in the cookstove. There was such deadly seriousness in her face and she was so oblivious to everything else that I grinned. She hadn't even heard me get up.

"What's all this activity?" I asked. "Come on to bed and relax. Helen'll be over pretty soon and cook breakfast for all of us."

She turned on me, bristling like an outraged porcupine. "Over my dead body, she will!" she said, banging one of the stove lids down on top of the wood in the firebox.

"Keep your shirt on," I said, without thinking. "Helen's a good cook and she won't poison us."

"Bob Crane, I don't doubt but what she's a good cook. She's probably the greatest cook in the world, from the way you go on about her." I couldn't recall having even mentioned Helen's name more than twice since we'd been married. "Maybe I'm not so good and I'll poison us, but no woman is going to come in my kitchen and cook! I'll burn the house down first."

"But, Christ," I said, beginning to get sore, "what do you expect Jake and Helen to do? Go into town for their meals? They haven't even got a cookstove over there in that house."

"You're just deliberately trying to misunderstand me. I didn't say they couldn't eat here with us. I said she couldn't run my kitchen. Of course they can eat with us. But if you think for a minute—"

"I don't think for a minute. I guess I haven't thought for years," I said, beginning to see that she was right, as usual. And she looked so small and lovely and belligerent drawn up there for battle I had to grin. I walked in and grabbed her up until her feet were off the floor and kissed her.

"All right, Lady of the Manor, I'll go right over now and murder Jake and Helen in their bed. What do we have for breakfast?"

"Bacon and eggs. Do you love me, Bob? And hot biscuits." Her voice was muffled down against my neck.

"Of course I love you and hot biscuits. Now you take one that's cooked right on top of that hot head of yours—"

“I’m sorry,” she broke in. “I’m ashamed of myself. But the idea of anybody else coming in my house and cooking for you makes my blood boil.”

I laughed. “I know, you little wildcat. Your blood has the lowest boiling point of any fluid known to science.”

After I had shaved and dressed I went out on the front porch and saw Helen and Jake come out of the house and start across the road. They saw the Buick parked under the sweet-gum trees and must have noticed the smoke coming out of the kitchen stovepipe, for they turned around after a brief conference and went back inside. I was puzzled by this until they came out again in a few minutes and came on up to the front yard and I saw that Helen had changed into another dress and had put on stockings.

They were glad to see me and we went on back to the dining room, where Angelina had breakfast on the table. She and Jake knew each other, of course, from Jake’s foxhunting trips with Sam, but she and Helen hadn’t met before.

Breakfast came off successfully. Jake and I did most of the talking at first, but gradually Angelina and Helen got over their polite sparring around and became a little warmer. It would be hard for anyone to resist Helen for long, with her simple and greathearted friendliness, and after Angelina had established her beachhead with several references to “my kitchen” and what she was going to do with the house and had decided that Helen was a very plain girl, pleasant-looking but homely and therefore nice, everything went along all right.

There, was some embarrassment about the cooking arrangements, Jake and Helen insisting after breakfast that they didn’t feel they should impose on us now that I was married. I had to return Lee’s car, so I said I’d pick up a stove for their house while I was in town.

I went in alone. Angelina said she wanted to unpack the bags and clean up the house, and I didn’t much want her to go anyway until I found out what was happening or had happened. It was a little before nine when I stopped under the big oaks in front of the house.

My Ford was parked in the driveway, with one fender knocked off. It hadn’t been there last night. I went up on the porch and knocked, but no one came to the door. I knocked again and then tried the door. It wasn’t locked

and I went in and walked down the dark hallway to the living room, hearing my footsteps echo in the silence.

There were cigarette butts and ashes on the rug in the living room and one of the pillows on the sofa was half burned up and feathers were all over everything. There was a fruit jar sitting on the hearth in front of the fireplace.

I knew then I wouldn't find Mary there, so I went in all the bedrooms looking for Lee. In their room the bed looked as if somebody had been sleeping in it with his shoes on, and there was a girl's coat over a chair, a coat I knew didn't belong to Mary.

I found him in the kitchen. He was sitting in a chair, asleep, with his head and shoulders slumped over the table. Near his arms there was a half-eaten sardine sandwich that a fly was buzzing around, and a cigarette butt that had burned a long charred furrow in the top of the table before it had gone out.

I sat down across the table from him and shook him gently by the shoulder. "Wake up, Lee," I said. "It's Bob." It took several shakes to stir him, and when he finally did come to he sat up shakily, pushing himself slowly up with his arms, and stared at me without saying anything. His eyes were shot with red and there were dark circles under them.

"Hello," I said.

He looked at me stupidly for a minute. "You sonofabitch," he said.

I got up and went back into the living room and got the fruit jar. There was about an inch of whisky in the bottom of it and I poured it into a water glass and gave it to him. His hands were trembling badly but he got it up to his mouth and swallowed it and then coughed and retched. He shook his head, but when he looked up at me again I could see the stuff working on him. His eyes began to come alive a little.

"Well," he said, "if it isn't Handsome himself. So you finally came back?"

"Yes. I'm back." I sat down again, across the table, and lit two cigarettes and handed one to him.

"Where'd you leave her?" he demanded. He leaned across the table and took hold of my arm and I could feel him shaking.

"Leave who?"

“You know who I mean. Where’d you leave her? Jesus Christ, I’ve almost gone nuts the past ten days, thinking about you off in a hotel room somewhere with that.”

“Take it easy,” I said, but he began talking louder. He looked like a madman.

“Hell, haven’t you been with her? What’ve you been doing all this time? If you’ve been with her this long, what’s holding you up? I don’t see how you’d be able to walk.”

I picked up the half-eaten sandwich off the table and shoved it into his mouth, all the way in, to the last quarter inch of it, and held my hand over his face. He choked and tried to pull back and hit at my arm, but I grabbed him by the collar with the other hand and held him still. The glass bounced off the table and broke on the floor.

“Chew on that,” I said. “That’ll give you something to do with your goddamned mouth. And keep it shut.”

My hands were shaking as badly as his had been now and I could feel the fluttering in my stomach and the dry stickiness in my mouth from my breath going through it. Take it easy. Take it easy. He’s drunk and doesn’t know what he’s doing. And how does he know what’s happened since that morning you left? How could he know?

His eyes were fixed on my face, and it must have been tough to look at, for I could see the fear in them. I let go and he spat out the bread and took a deep breath and tried to push back from the table and get up, all at the same time, and he fell over backward with the chair under him. When he untangled himself he stood up and stared at me with his mouth open.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” he asked, still trying to get his breath back. “You’re absolutely nuts.”

“Pick up your chair, Lee,” I said. “And sit down.” I had hold of myself now. “Let’s just forget the whole thing and start over. I came to town to tell you and Mary that Angelina and I were back from our trip and to ask you to come out and see us.”

“You mean you brought her back with you? She’s out there? You must be nuts.”

“You still hungry? There’s some more of that sandwich,” I said.

He sat down and stopped talking.

“Where’s Mary?” I asked.

“How the hell do I know where she is? At her grandmother’s, I guess.”

“She’s left you?”

“Yes. What of it?”

“When?”

“About two days after you left. She found out about that Angelina business somehow. I guess I spilled it when I was drunk. She was suspicious anyway, because she couldn’t quite swallow that story about you bein’ mixed up in it. I guess she always thought you were some kind of a fair-haired boy or something. Anyway, she found out the whole thing and said she was going to leave me. I’d been drinking and was still half nutty over this Angelina deal, so I told her I didn’t care, to go ahead.”

“Didn’t you even go over there afterward and try to smooth things over?”

His face was surly and he looked away. “It wouldn’t have done any good. Not after what happened. The second night her grandmother must have promoted her into coming back over to have a talk about it, because she did come back and she got here at the wrong time. I had called up an old girl I used to run around with at Rice, who was here visiting in town, and she was here when Mary came in. This babe had on one of Mary’s nightgowns and was drunker than a preacher’s bastard son, and in our bed, and you think I ought to go over and smooth things out, do you? Not that I give a damn. We were washed up anyway.”

I got up to go. There wasn’t anything to be gained by sticking around. “I’m sorry, Lee,” I said.

“Oh, to hell with it,” he said. “Did you bring my car back?”

“Yes, it’s out there.” I dropped the keys on the table.

“Well, that’s nice of you. I’m always glad to have my car when you’re not using it.”

I didn’t say anything. When I started out of the kitchen, he said, “I almost decided to report it stolen, so you’d be picked up.”

“You almost did?” I said, and went on out through the living room. When I looked back he was still sitting there at the table.

Twenty-one

The next week Lee was sentenced to sixty days in the county jail for drunk driving. He was going through the square at about forty late one night and crashed into a parked car and almost demolished it. It cost him nearly four hundred dollars to have the two cars repaired and he couldn't get off with merely a fine this time. He'd been fined and warned too many times. He went to jail for the full two months.

Mary had filed suit for divorce. I went to see her, knowing it wasn't any of my business and that it wouldn't do any good. She listened to me patiently and never once told me not to butt in, but her mind was made up. She didn't seem to blame Lee and she wasn't bitter about it; it was just that she was through. I tried to get her to go around to the jail with me to see him, but she shook her head.

We were sitting in a booth in Gordon's café. She toyed with the two straws that came with the Cokes.

"I'm sorry, Bob," she said. "But what's the use? The thing is over and done, so why prolong the agony? It just makes me feel bad to see him because I always get to thinking of how it could have been with us. It isn't a lot of fun to look at him and think what a man he could have been if he'd ever grown up."

"I guess so," I said. "I always had hopes that with you he'd settle down and quit raising so much hell, but I guess that never really happens, does it?"

Her eyes were a little amused. "No, I don't think there's any such thing as a woman making a man out of anybody. You never heard of a man making a woman out of anybody, did you? She can take a man and make a civilized man—that is, a married one—out of him, but she has to have a man to begin with."

"Oh, I think he's man enough to come out of it," I protested. "I know he's crazy as hell and wilder than a March hare, but I wouldn't call him a

weakling.”

She shook her head with what seemed like exasperation. “There goes the professional male speaking again. A man is something that has a lot of hair on its chest, isn’t it, and a deep voice that rumbles down in its belly, and goes around trampling on its hairy brothers with cleats.”

“O.K.,” I said. “Maybe you’re right.”

When we got up to go she said something that puzzled me, and it wasn’t until long afterward that I figured it out.

“Bob, why don’t you go away from this country? I don’t think Lee ever will.”

“You mean, on account of that business? I don’t think it’s necessary. It was pretty rough at first sometimes, but I’ve about got it out of my system now.”

She gathered up her purse and I picked up the check. “Yes, I know you have. I suspect you of growing up. You’ve got over it. But has Lee?”

She wouldn’t say any more and she was quiet as I drove her back to her grandmother’s.

“Good-by, Bob,” she said. “I’ll be out to see you one of these days.”

August was beautiful. I almost forgot Lee entirely in my preoccupation with Angelina and the task I had undertaken in attempting to teach her to like the country the way I did. I went to see him once a week and took him cigarettes and some books, but he was surly most of the time and didn’t seem to care whether I came or not.

One afternoon when Angelina and I were swimming down at Black Creek, Sam came up on us, appearing out of the heavy timber with his shotgun. He was hunting squirrels and had two of them, big fox squirrels.

We hadn’t seen him since our return. Twice we had gone to visit Mrs. Harley and had taken some presents Angelina had brought back from Galveston, but both times he had been away from the house and I was pretty sure she had known he would be.

He grinned and seemed embarrassed, as though he had caught us undressed or something. “Howdy, Bob,” he said, shifting his gun to the other hand. “Howdy, Angelina.”

Angelina’s “Hello, Papa,” was as impersonal as death. I asked him how the crops were and how the hunting had been and if he’d been fishing for white perch lately, but Angelina never said another word. I felt sorry for

him, the way he was standing there and not wanting to look at her, half naked as she seemed to him in her scanty bathing suit, and still wanting to look at her because she was his oldest daughter and the prettiest one and he loved her. He was talking to me but it was easy to see he was hoping she would say something to him, perhaps some word of our trip, or when she expected to be over to visit them again, or whether she was happy and liked her new home, or some question about his health, or anything at all, but no word came from her.

“We’ll be over to see you soon, Sam,” I said, as he half turned to go.

“Yes, you-all do that. We’ll be lookin’ for you. Good-by. Good-by, Angelina.”

Angelina looked up briefly and said, “Good-by, Papa.”

When he had gone, I asked, “I haven’t been mean to you in a long time, have I?”

“Of course not. Why ask such a silly thing?”

“Don’t let me, ever. I never want to have to listen to you say, ‘Good-by, Bob,’ the way you said that. The poor devil.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I can’t help it, I guess.”

We went to all the dances, the ones in town and the little country dances that were held now and then on Saturday nights in the surrounding communities, and I took her to the movies about twice a week. I had never cared a lot for pictures, but she liked them and we went. A lot of times all this going seemed a little silly and it would have been much more fun to stay at home, but always I guess there was a fear in the back of my mind that she wouldn’t like living out here if there were too much to remind her of her previous unhappiness. I didn’t want her to continue associating that unhappiness with country life when the truth was that the mere fact that her father was a farmer had had nothing to do with it I wanted her to learn that a girl could live on a farm without being imprisoned and cut off from other people her age and having to wear clothes she hated.

One night after supper, when I suggested a ride into town for a movie, Angelina surprised me by asking if we couldn’t stay at home instead.

“There’s a full moon tonight,” she said. “Let’s stay here on the back porch and just look at it.”

I agreed quickly. “Sounds like a lot more fun to me,” I said. We sat down on the top step and she leaned her head against my shoulder. The moon

hadn't come up yet over the timbered ridge to the east across the bottom, but already we could see the glow of it looking like a far-off forest fire.

"Are you happy, Angelina?" I asked.

"You know I am. More than there's any way to say."

"You don't feel that living on a farm is like being in jail any more?"

"No. I never did, except over there." She was looking across the bottom toward the glow. "I've never felt like that here with you."

In a moment she laughed a little and said, "You're funny, Bob, aren't you? You've courted me so hard ever since we've been back here that sometimes I wondered if you'd forgotten we're already married. Goin' to movies and dances, and swimmin'. It's sweet of you, but you don't have to work so hard at it."

"Well, I didn't want you ever to feel about this place the way you did over there."

"I won't. Even if you'd made a jail out of it. There's such a thing as still liking the jailer."

"Fine," I said. "All this foolishness stops right now. Tomorrow morning I take your shoes away from you and you go out and hoe cotton."

"You don't hoe cotton after it's laid by, silly. You can't fool a country girl."

"You see what I mean, Angelina?" I said. "A few months ago you'd have been as sore as a boil if anybody'd called you a country girl. You'd have thought it was an insult."

"I'd have scratched their eyes out."

"No, you wouldn't. You don't scratch. You double up your little dukes and start throwing punches like a good bantamweight."

"I guess that's the only reason you like me, because I fight like a man instead of a girl."

It wasn't all play those two months, even though I neglected a lot of things to be with her. Jake and I cut corn tops and shocked them and sawed a lot of wood for the coming winter. But in addition to the work there were always the swimming down in the bottom and the white perch fishing, and the watermelons to be eaten, and the books to be read on the grass under the towering white oaks, and always the ever increasing fun of just being together. That summer was one I would never forget.

Twenty-two

Early in September we started picking cotton in the upper fields, with just a few pickers at first and increasing as the days went by and the bolls began opening faster under the hot sun. It was still dry and little dust devils chased each other across the fields like miniature cyclones and the drone of the dry-weather locusts went on throughout the dusty, sweaty afternoons.

Lee was released from jail a week after we started picking. We were becoming busier then and I didn't have time to go to town. Jake was running the wagon, hauling the cotton to the gin, and I was doing the weighing for the pickers in the field.

I heard that he was out, though, and that he had gone back to the big house on North Elm and was living there alone. I sent word to him to come out and see us, not much expecting that he would since he had been so sour and unfriendly the times I had gone to the jail to visit him. So I was surprised to see the big roadster drive up late one Saturday afternoon.

He came down the hall and I noticed first that he was sober and that he was looking well. Apparently sixty days in jail and being at least partially cut off from his liquor supply had been good for him. He was dressed in brown tweeds that fitted him the way all his clothes did, and he was wearing that gravely smiling demeanor that had disarmed so many people in his life.

He lounged in the doorway and looked at me and said smilingly, "Hello, yokel. I hear I'm invited to supper."

Angelina came in from the kitchen and stopped when she saw him. It was the first time they had met since we came back and I supposed all of us were trying not to think of the last time they'd met. At least, I knew Angelina and I were, but no one was ever sure what Lee was thinking.

He stepped forward with that urbane gravity that reminded me so much of the way he used to be when he wanted to put on an act, and said, "Hello,

Angelina,” and they shook hands. He might have been a Supreme Court justice greeting his favorite niece.

Angelina said, “Hello, Lee,” and I was proud of her. I hadn’t known there could be so much simple dignity in an eighteen-year-old.

He was quietly courteous to her throughout the meal, never ostentatiously attentive but on the other hand never asking me a question or saying anything to me without turning to include her and to get her view. I was proud of the way he was behaving and happy to see him like this. They were the two people I loved more than anybody else in the world and I wanted that ugly thing that had been between us buried once and for all, and when he casually mentioned that he was thinking of going back to work I was suddenly satisfied with everything in life.

“You know much about hardwood, Bob?” he asked, finishing his coffee. We had lit the kerosene lamp and he looked handsome as the devil himself with his smooth brown head and dark eyes.

“Not much. Why?” _

“Oh, I was just thinking. You know, just before he finally decided to get rid of both his mills, the Major had been looking into the hardwood business. He never did do anything about it, but he had gathered a lot of figures and had some of the best oak and walnut stands spotted, and I’ve been giving it some serious thought lately. I might try to get one of those mills back and start cutting oak. There’s good money in it if you get into a good stand and know how to run the business.”

“Well, you should know enough about it, all those years with the Major,” I said.

“I may do it. I can’t go on doing nothing all my life.”

He stayed until about ten and we talked a lot and played the phonograph, and the evening was almost perfect. There was one moment when I wasn’t so sure, but afterward I wondered if perhaps I hadn’t imagined it, or at least exaggerated it. It was while I was lighting a cigarette and Angelina had got up to go across the room for something and for a second when he must have thought he was unobserved I saw what was in his eyes as they followed her figure across the room.

When he had gone I said, “Maybe he’ll come out of it yet. Don’t you think so, Angelina?”

“Maybe so, Bob.” She was rather quiet.

“He’s all right when he’s behaving himself, isn’t he? What did you think?”

“He was nice, all right. And he’s the best-looking man I ever saw, even in the movies.”

“Well, I asked for it,” I said, a little sore.

She laughed. “Are you mad because you’re not as pretty as he is, Bob?”

“No. But, Christ, no man wants to sit there and hear his wife—” She kissed me and I shut up and was satisfied.

For the next week or ten days he came to see us often, nearly always coming around suppertime, and often bringing us a steak or some ice cream or something else from town. But I noticed that after each visit Angelina was a little more preoccupied and moody, and one day she asked me if we ought to have him so often.

“Well, we don’t have to,” I said, surprised. “But, after all, he’s my brother. And it seems to help keep him from drinking.”

“Maybe” was all she would say.

Suddenly he didn’t come out any more for supper. A whole week, the last week in September, went by with no visit from him. We were finishing up the cotton in the bottom now and Jake and Helen and I were down there all day long. Angelina wanted to come down and pick with us, but I refused. I wasn’t going to have my wife work like a field hand. Then she wanted to do the weighing or ride the wagon to the gin with Jake. She said she wanted to get away from the house. I thought it was because of the beautiful Indian-summer weather and said I’d think about it.

That same day, late in the afternoon, Jake and I were putting on a bale that was going to the gin the next day. I was passing the cotton up to him in a big woven basket from the pile on the ground near the weighing station and he was dumping it and tramping it down in the bed, going round and round the high cotton-frame sideboards and putting all his weight on one foot and pushing down.

He chuckled suddenly. “Bob, that brother of yourn shore does goose a car, don’t he?”

“Yeah,” I said absently. “Anything under fifty is parking to him.”

“I seen him come out of yore driveway this afternoon an’ make that there sharp turn onto the road an’ I swear they wasn’t only two of his wheels on the ground.”

“That so? I thought he’d forgotten us, he hasn’t been out in so long.”

“Oh, he comes out every day. I see him on the road out there a lot. I was wonderin’ why you didn’t put him to pickin’. Guess that’s the reason he stays up to the house, though, so you won’t put him to work,” he said, and laughed.

“Yeah,” I said. I was bent over the pile, pushing cotton down into the basket, and I tried to keep it out of my voice. He was above me and couldn’t see my face and by the time I had the basket packed full I had hold of myself and passed it up expressionlessly.

We finished loading the wagon and started up the hillside road toward the house with Jake driving. We stopped in the lot next to the barn and I helped unhitch, working mechanically and only half listening to Jake’s chatter. I could have left the unhitching to him, but I didn’t want him to notice anything unusual.

When we had fed the mules I said, “I’ll see you in the morning, Jake,” and started up to the house.

Angelina was in the dining room, putting the last of supper on the table. I stopped in the door.

“Do you still want to come down in the bottom with us tomorrow?” I asked.

“Sure. Can I, Bob?” she asked eagerly.

“Every day?” I asked.

“Yes. Until we’re through down there.”

“You don’t like to stay up here at the house, do you?”

“No. I hate it when the weather’s so nice.”

“Just on account of the weather?”

She must have noticed something strange about it then, for she looked at me sharply with worry in her eyes.

I came on into the dining room and walked over to her and caught both her arms. “Now tell me. Why do you want to get away from the house?”

“I’ve told you.”

My hands were cutting into her arms and I could hear her indrawn breath as she tried to cover up the pain.

“Tell me.”

“All right,” she said. “I’ll tell you, Bob.” I released her arms and she rubbed them where my hands had been. “But, please, you won’t do

anything, will you? Promise me you won't do anything to him."

"Why? Are you in love with him?" I should have known better than to say that but I wasn't thinking very clearly.

"What do you think, Bob?" she asked quietly.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean that."

"I didn't want to tell you. That's the reason I wanted to come down there with you, so I wouldn't have to be here. I guess I could have just gone off and hid in the woods all day, but it seemed kind of crazy to do that. He came out here every day, even during the time he was coming out at night to have supper with us. And he was drinking a lot and lots of times I'd have to fight him off. And that's the reason he hasn't been out here at night the last week, because one day I hit him real hard in the face and it gave him a black eye. I guess he didn't want you to see that. There wasn't anything I could do. I couldn't tell you because I knew how you are and I was afraid of what would happen. He kept begging me to go away with him somewhere and hinting that if I didn't people might find out about that—that thing that happened and why you and I were married. He didn't say he would tell anybody, but he said that if I didn't go with him he couldn't stand it and drank too much and that he might let things fall when he was drunk. Of course, I didn't mind that part of it because he was just silly and nobody cares what he says or tells—we don't, do we?—but when he was drunk and I had to fight with him it was bad."

When she stopped talking I said, "Is that all?"

"Just about. Except that sometimes when I watched for the car and saw him coming I would run and hide and he would look all over the house and barn until he found me."

"And he was drunk?"

"Most of the time. Not always. Bob, can't we sell this place and go somewhere else? I know you want to live on a farm, the way you told me in Galveston that time, but you could buy one somewhere else, away from him."

"You don't have to leave the country just because a man won't leave your wife alone," I said. "Not this country."

"Don't you see that's the reason I didn't want to tell you? Can't you see it, Bob?"

I started toward the front door and she came after me and caught me in the hall.

“Don’t go without promising, Bob,” she said. She couldn’t cry, I guess, the way another girl would. All she could do was to look at me in that awful way and keep asking me over and over. I knew then that I didn’t have any right to do what I was doing to her.

“All right,” I said. “I won’t.”

I didn’t have any idea where I might find him but thought I would try the house first. It was possible he might be there. It was dark when I turned into the driveway off North Elm.

I didn’t knock this time. The door was unlocked and I went on in and walked back to the living room and he was there with a girl I didn’t know. They were sitting on the sofa drinking highballs.

The girl was blonde and about twenty-five, I guess, and looked as if she knew her way around. She gave me a cold stare and said, “Well, of all the nerve!”

“Beat it,” I said.

“Lee, who the hell is this monstrosity?” she said.

“My knuckleheaded brother,” Lee said. “Don’t you ever knock?” This last was for me. His eyes were bright and I knew he’d had at least enough to be nasty.

“Well, suit yourself,” I told the girl. She seemed to want to stay. Lee got up off the sofa and I hit him. He sat back down and a cut place on his lip began to bleed. What with the black eye he already had, he wasn’t going to look like much in a little while. He got back up and I caught hold of his lapel.

“How drunk are you?” I asked.

“What the hell’s the matter with you, anyway?”

“I’ve got something to say to you and I want it to soak in. Maybe I’d better sober you up.”

He swung at me and landed on the side of my neck, and then threw two more that I didn’t even bother to knock down. I pushed him back and let go his lapel and hit him over the heart with a right. He started to back up and hit the sofa with the backs of his legs and lost his balance and I caught him again, this time by the arm. I could see he was too drunk to hit a clothing-

store dummy, so I shoved him back into the kitchen. The girl was screaming by this time.

He was still trying to hit me and I pushed him hard and he bounced against the wall and sat down. I found a dishpan and stuck it under the faucet in the sink and when it was full I threw it in his face and filled it again. Whenever he got up I hit him and went on with the water treatment.

The girl was standing in the doorway, still screaming, and she got on my nerves. I took a step toward her with a pan full of water and she went out through the living room and I heard her going down the front steps yelling, "Stop him! Stop him!" without ever seeming to pause for breath.

In about five minutes the kitchen was drowned and Lee sat hunkered down against the wall, not trying to get up any more. Water ran out of his suit like a spring branch out of a moss bank and his hair was plastered down in his face. I dropped the dishpan on the floor and went over and squatted down on my heels in front of him.

"You sober?" I asked.

"I can hear you," he said.

"It won't take long. I don't want Angelina to have any more trouble with you."

He began to be afraid then. I mean, really afraid. There was no doubt now that she'd told me, and maybe before he hadn't been sure or the liquor had been holding him up. Anyway, he began to look the way he had that night when Sam was after him. He tried to get up and I pinned him down with a hand on his chest.

"Just stay away from my place from now on. You can remember that, can't you?"

"I heard you the first time."

"O.K." I stood up and walked to the door and looked back. He was still scared, but I was glad he didn't have a gun.

Twenty-three

I drove slowly going home, taking a long time and doing a lot of thinking, and the thoughts weren't very good company. No matter how often I went over it and added it up again, it always came out the same. I had been very near to killing my brother, and if it hadn't been for Angelina I might have done it. It had come out all right— this time. I had warned him, and scared him, and he would leave us alone—for a while, probably, and when he wasn't drinking. But it would wear off. And just suppose that, instead of the way it had happened, I had come home unexpectedly one of those times he was out there drunk and she was having to stand him off. What then? Nobody knows what he would do under those circumstances, but it's not a chance you'd like to take.

And nothing had been settled by this business tonight, not a thing. Maybe I had made him think while he was scared and sober, but what about the next time he got drunk?

Angelina and I sat up late on the back porch talking about it. Her idea was the same as the advice Mary had given me weeks ago, advice I hadn't understood until last night. Why didn't we move away from this country? It was really the only thing to do if the three of us couldn't live in the same place without trouble.

"I know you're right," I said. "It adds up, and it's the only thing that does. But it isn't as simple as that. This farm is really the only home I ever had. Maybe I did just live out here in the summers when school was out and in town the other nine months, but this was home. And I don't take to the idea of being shoved off it."

"I know what you mean," she said. "It's home to me too now. But we're both young and if we went somewhere else we'd soon get to like it. I know we would."

In the morning we had to take that bale to the gin. Jake wanted to go into town to get his account straightened out at the store and to buy a connecting

rod and some gaskets for his car, which had burned out a bearing a few days before, so I suggested he take my car and go ahead, and I'd take the cotton to the gin.

After breakfast, when I had the team hitched, Angelina came down to the lot and opened the big gate for me to drive through. She blew a kiss up to me and said quietly "Will you think about leaving, Bob? Will you think about it today?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll think about it."

I drove out on the road and watched her walk back to the house. It's funny, I thought, how just watching her walk can be like that.

I thought about leaving. It would be hard to take, but I think I knew all along what the answer would be. It wasn't as if I had to leave this kind of country and go off to a city and be a bookkeeper or a clerk or something, or even go to a different kind of farming country where it was dry, like west Texas, for instance, where farming was a business and you irrigated and farmed with tractors. No, there was plenty of country like this in the South.

And wasn't Angelina the only thing that mattered, anyway? It sounded silly and somehow mawkish, like one of those YMCA guys in college, to say, "I want my wife to be happy," but when you thought about it, it was really just another way of saying you wanted to be happy. You can't live with a happy woman without being happy yourself.

We could go, all right. It might take a long time to sell the place, but the bank could handle it for us and maybe Jake would stay on until it was sold. Jake was the kind of man you could leave something with. I would miss him, though. And Helen. They were the kind of people you wanted to have around. And we still had enough money to buy another place without having to wait until this one was sold. Or at least enough to make a good down payment on one.

I thought about Lee. There was something saddening, even on a day like this, in thinking of him, because I would always remember the way things were between us when we were children, the way he had always taken up for me and stood as a buffer between the Major and me. But why think about it? It didn't do any good and just made things worse and sooner or later I would get around to that thing last night when I was so close to killing him. No, the only thing to do was to leave here and forget about him.

Whatever was going to happen to him was going to happen, and nobody could do anything about it.

The air was cool in the late afternoon as I drove back from the gin and I knew there might be frost tonight. I looked at the sun; in another hour it would be out of sight and it would be the blue hazy dusk of October by the time I got home. Angelina would have supper ready and she would be happy when I told her about leaving. I thought of the way her eyes looked when she was happy and knew it was worth it.

One of the mules had to stop momentarily, and I grinned as I recalled what had been great wit among the boys I had known when I was living out there on the farm with my grandfather. "Better turn yore mule over, mister. He's leakin' on that side."

Somebody came up behind me in a car, going fast, and as it swung out to pass the wagon I saw it was Lee. The top was down and as it went by he looked up and recognized me in the wagon. He slid to a stop a hundred yards or more down the road and backed up until we were side by side, taking up the full width of the road. I stopped the team.

He rested his arms on the wheel and looked up at me. I could see he was sober, but his eyes were like holes burned in a blanket and there was something somber in his face.

"I was just going out to your place," he said quietly.

"You've got a short memory," I said. He was silent and I went on, "Hoping to find me at home, no doubt?"

"Yes. I was."

"Well, it's nice you found me here. It'll save you the trip."

I could see the hurt in his face for a second.

"I wanted to see both of you."

"Never mind both of us."

He looked moodily down the road. "When a guy gets on your list, he gets on for good, doesn't he?"

"When he works hard enough at it," I said.

"Well, I don't blame you, I guess."

I lit a cigarette and looked at him. "You wanted to see me. I'm all ears. Let's have it."

"I just wanted to say good-by."

"You did. Last night. Remember?"

"I'm going away."

"That right? You be gone long?" I asked.

"For good, I think. I turned the house over to Mary this morning and the lawyers can straighten out the rest of the settlement. I won't be back."

"Why?"

"After last night? It'd just happen again, with all three of us here. And somebody'd get hurt eventually."

"Well, you know how to prevent it."

He looked at me a long time before he answered and I could see he didn't want to say it. I had never seen him so hopeless or so bitter. "It isn't that simple. Don't you think I know enough by this time to leave her alone if I could? But I can't. I just can't. Just knowing she's here . . ."

"You don't have to pull out," I said. "We are."

He shook his head. "No. It's the only thing for me to do. I've just about worn it out around here, some of the things I've done. That business last night just put the finishing touches on it. I didn't sleep any, thinking about it. There's nothing to keep me here any more."

I didn't say anything. He looked up at me and then down at his hands on the wheel, and then took out a cigarette and lit it.

"Well, so long, Bob," he said.

"So long."

"I'm sorry about everything."

"It was just one of those things."

"I'm going to stop by and apologize to her and say good-by."

"No," I said.

"Why not?"

"I don't care. But she won't want to see you."

"I know. But I'll try, anyway. I'll feel better about it."

"Suit yourself."

He shifted into gear, hesitating a little, and looked up at me.

"Well, I won't see you again, Bob," he said, still waiting.

I didn't move except to pick up the lines. "So long."

He let out the clutch and moved slowly ahead and turned once before he shifted into high and got rolling fast. I watched him until he was out of sight around the bend at the top of a long grade ahead and tried not to think about how it had been between us long ago.

Twenty-four

We plodded slowly on up the long grade and down on the other side and crossed the upper reaches of Black Creek on the concrete highway bridge. The sun was down now and the air was chill in the bottom.

I thought about our not having to leave here now that Lee was gone and I was glad about it, but there was sadness in it too. I wondered where he was going and what he would do and knew that I'd probably never know because he didn't write letters. He would be in touch with the bank and the lawyers over the divorce and property settlement, but he'd never write to me.

Away from here and in a new place where he wasn't known he might change. Away from here ... I was just kidding myself and knew it, but there was some kind of happiness in at least trying to believe it.

Next summer maybe we could get away for a week in Galveston. I remembered again that last night we were there and thought of the bonfire on the beach and the roaring of the surf and of the way she had been when I had kissed her, holding her in my arms there on the robe by the dying fire.

I was within a mile of the road junction where our country road turned off the highway and up the hill to go past the farm when I saw a Ford coming toward me along the bottom with a roll of red dust boiling up behind it. When it was closer I recognized it as mine. I stopped and Jake climbed over the door and got out. Helen was with him, dressed for town.

Jake looked from Helen up to me uncertainly. "Me and the Old Lady thought we'd go to the show."

"Fine," I said. I wondered why he was so hesitant about it. He didn't have to ask me where he could go, and he was always welcome to use the car.

"If'n you'd rather, I could take the team on in an' you could drive the car on home." He didn't look up.

“No,” I said. “You’d be late for the show by the time you got the mules home.”

“I jest thought mebbe you might be in a hurry to git home for supper.”

“It’ll wait,” I said. He continued to look down at his Sunday shoes, which were getting dusty in the powdery red surface of the road. “Did you see Lee?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. He turned and glanced toward Helen. I couldn’t see her face under the top of the car.

“He’s leaving,” I said. What the hell does Jake care what he does? I thought. But I had to say something because the silence was becoming awkward.

“I know.” He nodded. “I seen him a minute or two jest before we drove off.” He stopped.

I waited. He wanted to say something else but gave it up and turned back toward the car.

As he started to climb in over the door he paused once more and this time he looked squarely up at me.

“You sure you wouldn’t like for me to take the team in, Bob? I’d be glad to do it.”

I got the look in his eyes then and they were worried. I swung a leg over the side of the cotton frames and climbed down. There was no use asking him about it. He wouldn’t talk, but he wanted me to go home.

Helen got out of the car. “I think I’ll ride along with Jake, if you don’t mind, Bob,” she said. “It’s a pretty night for a hay ride with your best beau.” She tried to laugh at the joke but it didn’t quite come off.

“When you get in with the team I’ll unharness,” I said. “You can still make the second show.” Nobody said anything. We weren’t thinking about the show any more.

I backed the car up fast and swung it around and started up the road. The dusk was thickening now and I switched on the lights. When I made the turn off the road and started up the hill I had to go into low and the lights brightened up with the engine speed. Whatever it was that was scaring Jake hadn’t happened yet because he would have told me. It was just something that might happen. At the top of the hill I let the Ford back into high again and pulled the gas lever all the way down.

When I swung around the last turn I breathed again. There was a light in the kitchen, and somehow there isn't anything more peaceful and reassuring than light streaming from the window of a farmhouse kitchen. It was dark now and as I made the turn off the road my lights flicked across Lee's roadster parked in front of the house and for some reason I could not fathom I reached down and cut both lights and motor and let the Ford roll to a stop.

All sound and motion died with the car and I was alone in the night with only my heartbeat in my ears. I turned and went around the side of the house rather than through it. I don't know why. Maybe I was afraid of the dark part of it and wanted to go back to where the light was.

As I stepped up on the back porch I could hear someone talking. It was Lee. I couldn't make out the words, but he was talking quietly and slowly and didn't sound as if he were drunk. The tightness across my chest relaxed a little. I opened the door and went in.

The lamp that was burning was the one with the dark shade and it made a cone of light across the table with the rest of the room in partial shadow. Lee was on one side of the table with his arms resting on it and Angelina sat across from him, deathly quiet and moving only her eyes.

There was a bottle of whisky in front of him and a glass half empty just beyond his left hand, but he wasn't very drunk. At least, not as drunk as I have seen him. Except for the eyes as he half turned toward me I would have said he was sober. The eyes were blazing.

"Sit down, Bob," he said. "There by the door."

"Thank you," I said. "If you're leaving, don't let me keep you."

I was still blinking in the light and then suddenly the cold began to run down across my shoulder blades and into the small of my back. His hands were lying flat down before him on the table in the edge of the shadow beneath the lamp and under the right one was the flat ugly slab of a .45 automatic. It was mine, and I knew it was loaded.

I sat down—slowly, the way a man would carrying an armful of eggs. There was a delicate balance about the whole thing there under the yellow cone of light and it gave you the feeling the slightest movement one way or the other might tip into chaos. There was something about it that caught you by the throat, even though he wasn't wild drunk and cursing or waving the gun. Any of those things would have scared me, because you never know

about a drunk with a gun, but they wouldn't have scared me the way this did.

I kept it out of my voice as well as I could.

"All right," I said. "This is all very dramatic. But do you suppose I could have some supper now, or do we go on rehearsing the high-school play?"

He ignored me. There wasn't the slightest indication he had heard me or that he even remembered I had come in. He just went on talking. And he was talking to Angelina, or to himself. It was hard to tell which.

"Your hair is different now that you've cut it. But it's beautiful that way and it still shines the same under lamplight. I wonder why I never did write a popular song about it and call it 'The Beautiful Bitch with the Lamplight Hair' and maybe be famous all over the country and have a banana split named after me when I'm dead, instead of saving strands of it like a high-school girl or a man that's sick. Maybe the next thing I'd be saving your discarded clothes, and they have a name for people like that but I can't think of what it is and I don't want to think of it and you don't know and there isn't any way you can know how much I don't want to think of it and how much time I spend just not thinking of it."

Angelina's eyes were fixed intently on his face except for the once she glanced swiftly sidewise at me, begging me to be careful. I sat perfectly still, hating it, and hating the quiet the same way I had the night Sam had been here in this same room. It's always easier to take when there's more noise. A moth fluttered stupidly about the rim of the lamp chimney with frenzied gray wings and when it fell inside and was scorched Lee looked in through the glass at it for a long minute with grave speculation and then laughed as if at some joke that only he knew. The laugh wasn't something you'd want to hear often. I could feel a drop of sweat run down my temple and into the corner of my eye and blinked at the salty sting of it.

He picked up the glass as if weighing it and took a drink. It wasn't much of a drink, compared to the way he usually did it.

"Just exactly right," he said. "I should have been a chemist instead of whatever, it is I am, and if we know any long words that are what I am we won't say them tonight. I should have been a chemist because I've got it mixed just right. Or maybe a carburetor. I'm a carburetor that went funny over a bitch with lamplight hair. . . . It's mixed just right because if I mixed in three more drinks I'd cry and if I didn't mix in any more at all for a half

hour I'd be sober and that wouldn't be good because we all know what the big word for me is when I'm sober. You know what I'm like when I'm sober, don't you, Angelina, darling? I run from Sam and hide under the porch and get my nice new white linen suit all dirty. Not nice dirty. Dirty dirty. And things were simple then because I was just like anybody else who took it where he could find it and some of it was good and some of it was better and there wasn't anything complicated about it like not being able to go away or stay away or sleeping nights because you could always stay away, at least afterward and for a little while."

Angelina's face was quiet but I could see her eyes begin to fill. She tried not to blink them. There had been fear and horrified fascination in them, but now there was pity, and all the time she knew as well as I did what he was going to do.

I tried to shift cautiously a little farther out in my chair to get closer to him. He looked at me out of the corners of his eyes.

"Don't move," he said. I knew who was first on his list and who would still be first even if I tried to jump him, so I didn't move.

"Things were simple then but they're not any more and I can't go away. I went away this afternoon as far as I could but it was only five miles and then I couldn't go any farther. Then I saw how easy it would be if you went with me. Just the two of us. And it'll be easy, just like having your picture taken. Raise your eyes up and look at me and don't look down there and cry. I'm sorry you don't like whisky because you should always have one for the road and besides it makes everything easy. Just put your hand out here to me across the table and let me hold it. Here . . ."

She tried to draw back and she wanted to look over at me for help but was afraid to because I might jump for him. He had the gun up in his right hand now and there was no way he could miss if the thing went off, not from that distance. He caught her hand in his left, drew it gently across the table toward him, folded the fingers over into a little fist, and closed his own fingers over it. I could feel a great scream coming up inside me and fought with everything I had to hold it in.

"Lee!" I said, still trying not to scream like a woman. "Put down that gun!" I wondered if I were saying it over and over like a phonograph. Maybe I had been saying it for hours.

He looked at me as if I were a stranger speaking a foreign language. Whatever world he was in, I wasn't in it and he didn't know me.

"Lee!" I tried again, still yelling, and it got the same deadpan lack of interest. I fought to get my voice down to the same conversational level as his. "Listen, Lee."

"Yes?"

I had to get through to him some way. I had to make him listen. He was loaded and ready to go and if there was to be any stopping him it was going to be now. "Listen, Lee." I leaned forward as far as I could without giving the appearance I was going to jump him.

"Listen and get this." Afterward I remembered that some part of my mind was off by itself very objectively thinking what a damn fool thing that must sound like, saying, "Listen," over and over. "I want you to understand. You're drunk but you can understand me and know what I mean if you try. You can shoot that gun only once before I'll be on you and I'll have it. You know that. I'll break your arm but I'll have the gun. You'll have one shot. Just one." I knew I was saying the thing over and over like a parrot because I could hear my voice somewhere a long way off, coming through the roaring in my ears, and I wondered if I were yelling again or keeping it down so he could understand it or would listen.

"Maybe you haven't figured out yet what I mean by just one shot with it before I take it away from you. It means that if you shoot her you won't have time to turn it on yourself the way you think you're going to. And if you want to try it on me first you'll be taking a long chance too, because you're drunk and can't aim straight enough to get me cold the first time, and there won't be any second." He wasn't very drunk and I wasn't at all sure he couldn't hit me in any spot he pleased with one shot, but I hoped he was just drunk enough to believe me.

"But if you shoot her, I've already told you I'll have the gun before you can shoot again. So get this and do your best to get a good picture of what I mean. When I get it we're going to sit here."

I watched his eyes to see if it were getting through to him. If it did there was a chance, but if it didn't we were all done, and I tried not to look at her because I was afraid I couldn't take it.

"We'll sit here for an hour or two hours or whatever it takes until you're cold sober and shaking and scared. And then I'll shoot you. Sober."

I stopped. It seemed all time must have stopped too but I could hear the ticking of the clock in the living room. I tried to stop counting. Slowly Lee's hand opened and I saw Angelina slide hers out of his grasp and pull her arms in toward her on the table.

"Get up, Angel," I said. "Go into the bedroom and close the door."

She wasn't crying now but she was white as chalk and was holding her face together like something made of glass that was already broken and would come apart any minute. She got up very slowly and started around the end of the table. I watched Lee. He still had the gun in his hand and his eyes followed her until she turned at the corner of the table and started across the room toward the door behind him and then he turned his head away, straight forward, and let it slump down.

She went into the bedroom and closed the door and I could feel her there on the other side in the darkness holding onto herself and waiting and trying not to cry out, still standing because I hadn't heard her fall.

Lee looked up at me. Neither of us had moved. A strand of hair had fallen down across his forehead and it looked like a pen slash in India ink against the dead white of his face. My knees were weak and I could feel the muscles twitching in them.

"Bob," he said. Only that—"Bob." He said it as if he were going to add something else, but he never did. He raised the gun until it was just under his right temple and fired. Just at the end, in that last thousandth of a second, he jerked it a little as he pulled the trigger and it went higher than he had aimed but it wasn't high enough to make any difference.

I heard her fall then but I didn't go in to her until after I had gone over to where Lee was slumped forward over the table. His right arm was hanging down and I put it up on the table and stood there crying.

THE END

